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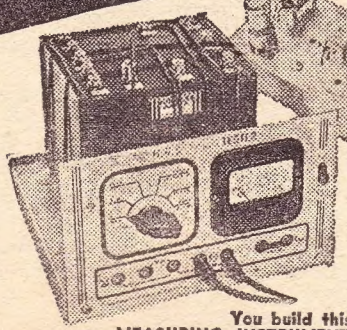

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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

Vol. 19
No. 2

November
1946

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Cover Painting by Joseph Sokoli

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PRODUCTION FOR DEATH

A Fact Article by GORDON DOZIER

When that vicious murderer and pirate went to his well-deserved doom, he objected to the fit of his execution garb—and why not, when he was to be the central character in a colossal super-spectacle that positively would run for one performance only?

COMP-LOVING and publicity-wise politicians, pandering to the taste of the public for morbid spectacles, staged one of the most elaborately produced executions on record when, on July 13, 1860, Albert Hicks was hanged by the Federal authorities on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor, where the Statue of Liberty now stands.

Hicks, a notorious New York waterfront gangster and thief, had been convicted of, and then confessed to, a particularly brutal slaying and robbery at sea the previous March. He had hacked to death with an axe the skipper and two other crew members of a Virginia-bound sloop aboard which, a few miles off Staten Island, he had awakened to find himself shanghaied. With a large amount of money taken from the skipper's strong-box, he then had rowed ashore. Caught in a net of circumstantial evidence, he was charged with piracy and robbery on the high seas.

The trial, conviction, and confession aroused tremendous public interest and, during the weeks he awaited execution, the Tombs prison was constantly crowded with visitors come to stare at the bearded, middle-aged pirate as he lay shackled to the floor of his cell. One of the early callers was P. T. Barnum who, after a day's haggling, got Hicks to agree to allow a plaster cast of his head and bust to be made for exhibition in Barnum's museum of curiosities upon payment of twenty-five dollars and two boxes of nickel cigars. The showman also traded a new outfit of clothing to the murderer for the historic one he was wearing. Later, the prisoner complained that he had been defrauded—the new clothing, on closer examination, was of poor quality.

July 13, the day of the hanging—and, appropriately enough, a Friday—arrived. Hicks, showing little unhappiness, ate the conventional hearty breakfast and smoked the last nickel cigar. (He then turned the empty cigar boxes over to the warden for delivery to Barnum who, naturally, had made a deal to exhibit them.) The prisoner dressed himself in a blue cottonade suit made specifically for the occasion. (He objected that it had been poorly pressed and didn't fit, but the warden testily told him that it was too late to have it fixed now.)

At nine o'clock, U. S. Marshal Isaiah Rynders—a Tammany boss who had risen to eminence from beginnings as a Mississippi River gambler and cutthroat and, later, a powerful Manhattan gang leader—entered the prison, heroically armed with the sheriff's ceremonial sword, borrowed for the great event, and flanked by Sheriff Kelly and a number of deputies. All were dressed in silk hats and black frock coats. In a dramatic voice, the marshal read the death warrant and formally instructed the prisoner to prepare himself for execution.

The shackled killer was then led from his cell into the main corridor of the jail. With the prison padre, Father Duranquet, at his side, he was surrounded by Marshal Rynders and the deputies who, their silk hats held across their expansive bosoms, formed a hollow square. The formation then solemnly marched through the prison gates and paused on the prison steps, across the street

(*Continued on page* 94)

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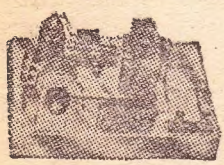

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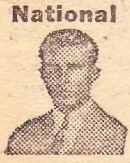

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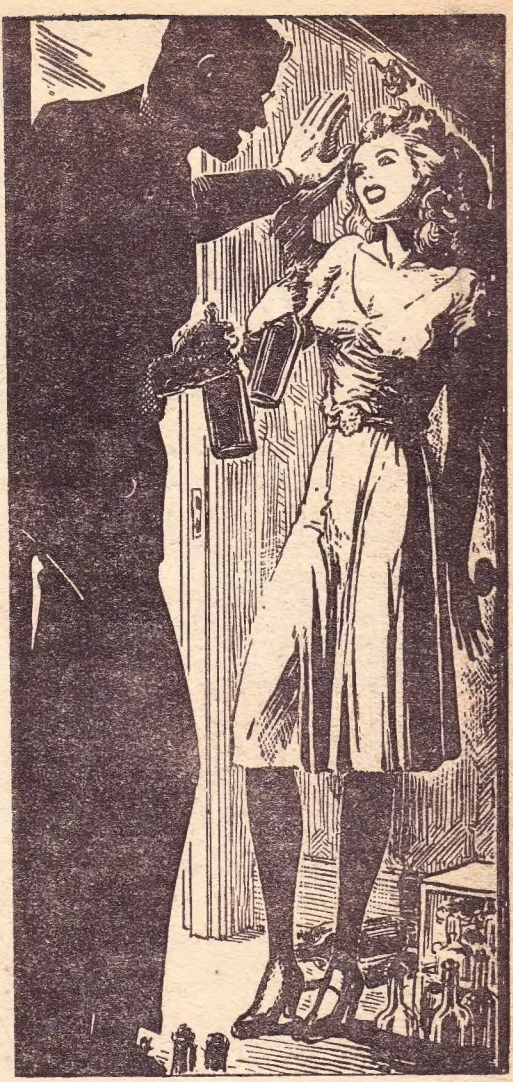
By

CAMFORD SHEAVELY

Illustrated by Paul H. H. Stone



The place called itself a "Hypnosis Research Club", and once it had been a bookie's joint. What could there be about it that had all the movie industry scared?

I HAD left my gun at home, on Cap Vandevere's advice. Because one man is easily euchred out of his gun by two or more men, I don't care how much scientific police training he has had. Gun! I didn't even have a search warrant, but this did not bother me. The motion-picture studios had tipped Cap, and promised a new car to the man who could get a conviction. Nobody else in Hollywood Division was bothering with search warrants. Why should I?

I had ridden by his place several times just before dark. He had a little narrow place in one of the agency buildings on the Sunset Strip. It had once been an antique shop. I know, because I put that owner out of business once for booking nice antique horse-race bets. Now there was a sign on the door which said:

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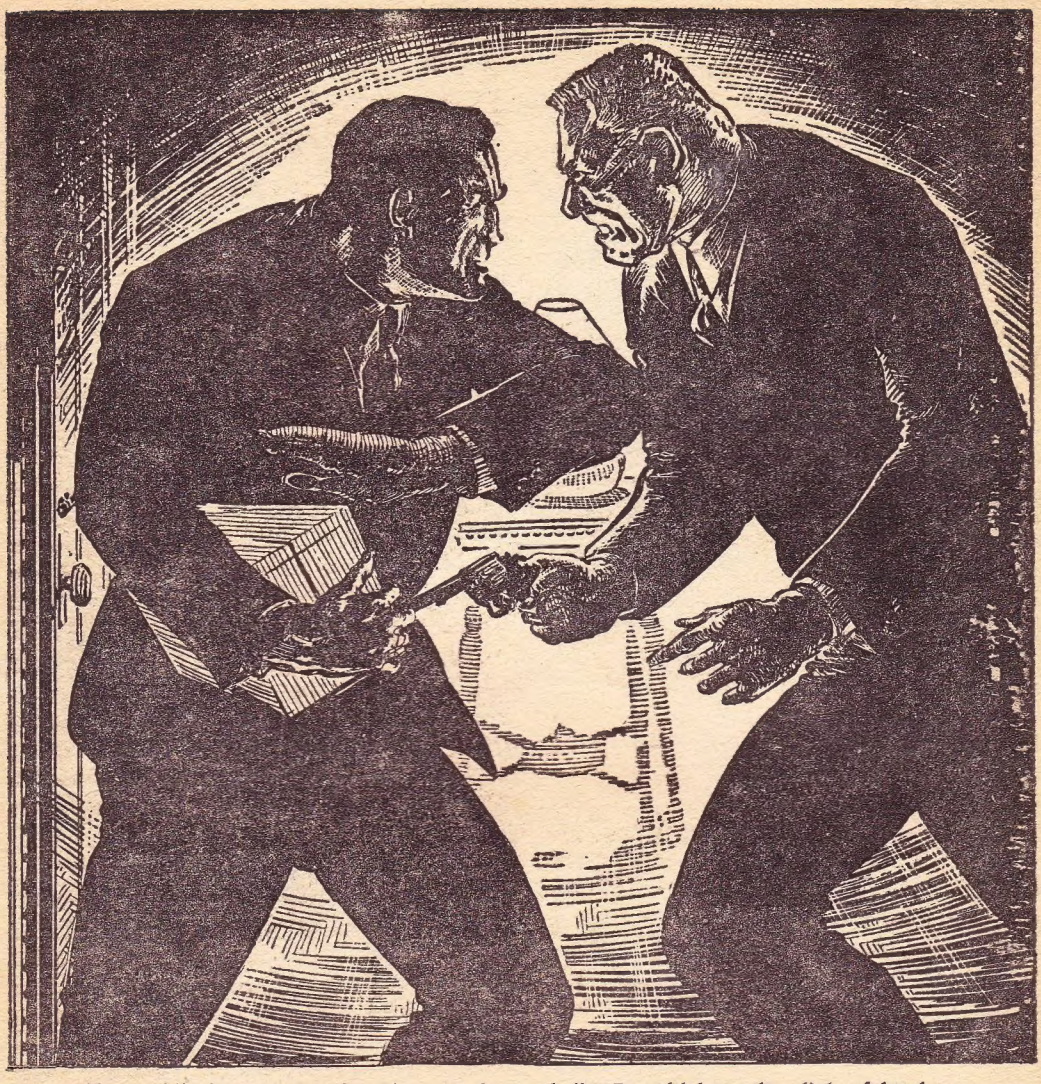
The place was dark. The file said the club never gathered until almost midnight. Some of the boys from Hollywood Division, drooling for that new car, had picked up several of the club members and driven them down



Even while he was ramming that gun in my belly, I could hear the clink of bottles through the thin wall.

to the station for a little private discussion. All they got out of it was some oddments and endments about hypnosis. My plan was different. I knew what the place looked like as a bookie joint. I wanted to see—when no one was around—what was in there now that would scare the movie industry.

Next door was the Hollywood office of a chain of fan magazines. They employed a correspondent, a photographer and a blonde. The correspondent was in the back room cuffing the stuffing out of a typewriter when I walked in. He shook his head and went on writing.

"No telephone men around lately," he said. "No noises next door. A bunch of screwballs, Lieutenant. The only bookie I know now has a MAdison phone number, near the City Hall."

"Key," I said.

He began squalling about his rights, and handed me the key. I went into his supply room, moved a couple of cases of empty whiskey bottles, and fitted the key into the door which connected the two suites. The lock turned just like old times, but someone had installed another lock on the other side. Not a tumbler lock, by the sound of it;

it was a sturdy, old-fashioned barrel-bolt.

I had a kind of a fit of hesitation then. Finding a lock where you don't expect one makes you wonder if you're chasing the sucker or are it yourself.

"Got a brace and bit, bub?" I asked.

"What would a magazine correspondent do with a brace and bit?"

"Bore people," I said. "All right, you haven't got one. Next best is let's trust each other. All I want from you is deep silence."

"Well, if you insist, Lieutenant," he said, sadly. "But if you get any dirt on the picture people, you owe me one."

"Times dull?"

"I've been paying my own way for almost two months," he confessed, "and I've been hanging out in the crumbiest places! You're breaking and entering, Lieutenant. Can't you toss me a herring of some kind?"

"This one is very quiet, bub," I said, "but I saved one from last night for you. Call a certain buck-toothed producer—he was booked under the name of John Smith, but that's just his jail name—and ask him about the redhead, the open-bill-fold, and the stomach pump. Now, are we even?"

"Redhead," he said. "Buck teeth. Bill-fold. Stomach pump. Now, who has buck teeth and lots of moolah?" He thought a moment and then his eyes lighted. "Say, Lieutenant, that's all right! That's right neighborly of you! It's the bill-fold that catches my fancy. John Smith, you say? Last night?"

"Sheriff's Malibu Station," said I, "and that's all I'm going to tell you."

He was dialing the studio when I went out the back door. Five minutes later he locked up and shoved off with the blonde in a big car. I knew I could count on him.

I wished I had my gun.

I FOUND a stick and pushed in the glass of a back window. I waited a few moments, but no burglar alarm rang out, no one came fleet-footed and indignant, baying for retribution. I got out one of my little vest-pocket flashlights. Their tiny batteries run only about an hour. I carried three.

The light was enough to show me the burglar-alarm circuit system inside. I took a piece of wire out of my pocket and shorted it across, and reached in and turned the door-knob. Sometimes you can short them and sometimes you can't, and the only way to tell is open the door. I opened the door.

Nothing happened. I stepped inside, found the burglar-alarm switch, and yanked it open. Then I breathed.

"So far, so good," I thought. "Now, if I only knew what to look for!"

I wasn't worried about the breaking-and-entering rap. The motion-picture people were worried about the new tenant of this property. They had not passed on any details to Cap, but they were looking right down the muzzle of a loaded scandal of some kind and they knew it. That's picture people for you. So used to pushing a buzzer and saying, "I want this," that they don't even bother to give the cops the stuff to go on.

All that was left of the previous tenant was a patch in the plaster here and there, where the telephone lines had been yanked out. Don't get any ideas of a ramshackle haunted house, though. I knew where to look for the patches. Everything was changed.

The room was spacious enough; it had held ten telephones and a slot machine once. (The slot machine was the mechanism by which the boss won back the wages he paid his phone men.) There was a door fore and aft, and the rear one through which I had entered, and another to the front room. The sides of this room were lined with good chairs. They looked expensive and comfortable, but they were not easy chairs. Rather, they were first-rate dining chairs, with leather upholstery—the kind bought for fifty bucks each at an executor's auction at the home of some late picture star.

In almost the center of the room, but not quite in line with the two doors, was a plain-looking center table, completely bare. Near the rear door there was wall space not occupied by a chair, and there were marks on the plaster which seemed to match the height of the table. I tried it, and they did. I moved the table back to the center of the room and counted the chairs by the light of my little flash.

"Twelve," I thought. "Seance? Looking

"What if the fireman is not there next time?" she wailed in her hypnotic sleep.

more like it every minute. That table, for instance. But it's not wired. If it's another lousy crystal gazer, I'll scream. Let's see what's in the front room."

The venetian blinds on the front door and window were pulled. I made sure they did not leak—or as sure as I could. Next I found that wall-lamp I remembered from the old days; and sure enough, it had one of those yellowish, flame-shaped, fifteen-watt bulbs in it. The switch was still haywire.

I took the bulb out and put it in the table lamp, in place of the big hundred watter, and turned it on.

The room warmed up to a kind of a blood-orange color, like the fire-escape exit of a third-class roominghouse. I could al-

most smell lysol! I snapped out my flash, saving it, and looked around.

THE most conspicuous thing in this room, which was smaller than the rear one, was the big shelf of books. I had to snap on my flash again, because the yellow light was never meant for reading. There was a long row of medical books, starting with a ragged old Anatomy and running up to two-volume sets of some pretty good recent diseases. With this library, plus ten dollars for rent, a couple of old magazines and a doctor's license, you could start practicing.

The rest of the shelf was loaded with books on hypnotism and kindred subjects. I picked out an easy-to-read one that seemed to be written for the average John Blow and laid it on top of the shelf, for future reference. The rest of that shelf wouldn't give you a hand-hold without a college education. Sometimes you can use stuff like that on a jury, but that's not my job.

The rest of the furniture consisted of a short leather sofa and another center table. On the center table was a photograph. I turned my flash on it and almost dropped it.

"Now I see why," I said to myself. "Now I get it! Oh, I just wonder if Cap knows—I wonder if I shouldn't give him a ring?"

There was the telephone on a shelf in the corner, with a little sign under it: *This number is* UNLISTED. *Please do not try to place toll calls.* I took a step toward it and changed my mind. Of course Cap would know about it! And if he hadn't told us all he knew—well, neither had the movie people leveled with him, either. Further, what he wanted was evidence, not a name—a conviction, not just indignation.

I went back and looked at the photograph. It had been taken before he went to San Quentin, and that was six years ago. He would look different now, but I knew the man pretty well, and I knew he was metal too hard to be scored by the San Quentin file. He would be older, that was all.

"I wonder if you're registered, Doc?" I whispered to the picture.

Of course he was registered! Ex-cons have to check in with the law in California, and Doc was scrupulous in trivia. When he took a hurdle, it was a big one. It caught your breath, particularly when he landed on his feet. He had done two hitches in Sing Sing before this little trip to Saint Quinine, which proved he could land on his tocus, too. But three slips in the kind of a life he led was not bad—not bad at all, when you consider he was just one man against every cop in the country.

I studied the picture closely. I saw a stern, bony, handsome face, the kind that goes well with a Prussian monocle. The long upper lip was firm over perfect teeth. The mouth was straight, cruel, a little haughty. The chin, again, was Prussian, as was the short, stiff shock of iron-gray hair. There was a long, fine scar on the man that did not show in the picture. It ran along the left side of his jaw, and our police files had among them an enlarged close-up of this scar, which showed tiny puckers where six sutures had once closed the cut.

He had said it was a saber-wound, and it looked it.

I put the photograph down, wishing I had my gun. I had seen quite a little of Doc just after he was sentenced, and while we were waiting for his appeal to be turned down before escorting him proudly to Warden Duffy's Tavern. *Then* he wouldn't have touched a gun, or any other weapon, himself. He had always planned things so a good lawyer and money to free him was all the weapon he wanted. If he won—why, he won! If he lost, and, as I say, he *could* lose—why, he lost! We had him down to the station a dozen times before we finally hung an illegal operation on him. He won and lost with the same contemptuous silence.

But that was six years ago.

NOW the thing I remembered was a notation in his file, something pretty simple and laughable at the time I read it. It was one of the earlier entries, by a detective who wrote very stupidly, but who had since turned up as Assistant Chief of Police. I knew why now. He had written his opinion without benefit of high-flown language, and this was it:

"Subject claims education, but Subject is nuttier than a pet coon."

Ha-ha, how he had laughed, coming across that rather innocent notation in the file a few months back. But as I picked up the photograph again, I did dearly wish for a gun; because this person had been in stir for six years and he was not as young as he used to be, and probably was not as sure-footed. He might just be fool enough to have a gun around, and use it.

Just for luck, I looked for one. I could not find it. I went back to the picture and sat down under the yellow light, and looked at it.

His name was Pan Waldemar, and he was German, all right, plus French, plus Italian, plus Spanish, plus Polish, plus a little Vermont Yankee. He had been about thirty-eight when he came to this country almost twenty-five years ago. He had married twice. His first wife died, leaving him a quarter of a million dollars. An exhumation two years later proved nothing except that she was dead—and they already knew that.

His name around the nation's police stations was "Doc," but I have heard young patrolmen address him respectfully as "Doctor," even as they fitted the handcuffs on him. He was a stern, silent, domineering man. He had a great brain in its way. Probably he had *started out* to be a doctor in Europe. Operating on his second wife was what sent him to Sing Sing the first time.

Not for manslaughter, you understand, but for practicing surgery without the proper qualifications. He did not need to worry about diagnosis, because she *had* appendicitis—I don't know how long he had to wait on it. But he was a patient man. He did not need to worry about her will, either, because all her property was signed over to him before she died. And there were dozens of witnesses who testified his wife refused to let anyone else treat her for anything.

One police psychiatrist said Doc Waldemar was probably better informed about medicine than any man in the country, and the last man to be trusted to practice it. Our man said he was both a maniac-depressive and a schizophrenic, the first time we hauled him in, that time for nudist didoes in a health camp. Well, the D. A. took him to court as a schiz and tried to have him salted away when he squirmed out of the health-camp rap. Doc's lawyer put him on the stand and he made monkeys out of a dozen State alienists, and walked out of the courtroom to a six-dollar dinner of white fish, Turkish coffee and Chablis.

I was getting a little creepy in the hair that hung down over my coat collar, looking at the picture. Up to now I had counted on movie influence helping to soften any breaking-and-entering rap, if it cost them a hundred grand. Then I thought I was crashing into another crystal-gazer's joint. Doc was different. If the movie mogus were scared of him, they damned well had a right to be. If Doc caught me breaking and entering, it would be just like him to whang away at me with a gun, and kill me dead.

Then where would I be, and where would the movie people be, with their influence? Well, I know where I'd be. Doc would know how to put the screws on the picture folks. They'd *have* to see he was acquitted —once, anyway.

Once is all you can be killed, though.

I PUT the picture down and got my book off the top of the shelf. Its title was *Hypnosis and Suggestion — A Rational Guide to Modern Study.* I sat down in the chair and opened it and skimmed the chapter heads. They were not written in a psychiatrist's double-talk. They were so blunt in what they had to say that my creepy feeling spread all over, before I ever dipped into the text.

"What's the angle?" I said to myself, closing the book. "Doc's not a cheap fortune teller, and I can't see him hooking up with a legit doctor to do the hyp tricks for him. Doc plays it alone, and he plays it hard. How does he plan to pry in with this? Blackmail? Folks telling secrets while they are out? I can't think of a better town than this to set up in *that* line of business."

I got up and turned his picture to the wall so I could read without looking up every few minutes to find Doc Waldemar kibitzing. He made me nervous. I looked at my watch. It was eight-forty-four.

Give me fairly simple interesting reading,

and I can read pretty fast. I would read a while and then get up and argue with myself. Hypnosis is one of those things you don't want to believe anywhere, and in this yellow light I fought believing what I read just the same as the character in the Bible wrestled with the devil. The author came at it pretty coldly. He didn't arouse your suspicion by over-arguing his case. He said he wasn't sure about anything, least of all his explanation of how it worked.

I put the book down a dozen times and tried to think of answers. The atmosphere was against me. They wouldn't come—if there were any answers. Take Case 212, who was put to sleep and told he would wear his overshoes to work the next day. He woke up, and next day, under the influence of "post-hynotic suggestion," he wore his overshoes to work. If that sounds silly to you, try this: Learn what is meant by "post-hypnotic suggestion," and read about old 212 under a yellow light in the private quarters of a presumably psycopathic ex-convict. You'll believe! If I am sure of one thing on this earth, it is that 212 wore his overshoes, sunshine, hot weather and all.

Or take the case of the kindergarten teacher who would start a school term in fine shape and blow up with a nervous breakdown in the middle of the first semester. Three times she did that. She was working in a cotton mill, education and all, when a hypnotist said he thought he could do something for her.

Do something? He put her under and said, "School is out; you don't need to worry any more, do you?" and she said, with a big smile, "Why, no, I don't!" Then he said, "What were you afraid of?" She told him. When she was a kid in school they had a fire scare and she got hysterical and made a fool of herself and led another little girl out the wrong door. A fireman led both of them to safety just in time.

"What if the fireman is not there next time?" she wailed, in her hypnotic sleep.

"Of course he'll be there!" the hyp said, soothingly. "You'll see, when you wake up, that I'm right. Remember only this—*the fireman will always be there!* But he'll be perfectly useless, because there isn't going to be any fire. You're altogether too careful about fires for one ever to happen in *your* school."

That was Miss 104. Sure, she's back teaching school and she hasn't got any more nerves than a marble cornerstone. She was an excellent "subject," being very intelligent and sympathetic. That is the first requirement. Next the hyp must have his subject in good surroundings—trappings that will aid suggestion, rather than combat it. Night and darkness help. Ten minutes of violin music and washing the face in warm water as an introduction seem to help many hyps, others not at all. Miss 104 went out like a light the first trip. The only aids the hyp used were a late hour and *a soft yellow light.*

I looked at my watch. It was ten-thirty-eight.

I GOT up and put the book back in the bookcase. I had learned absolutely nothing about Doc Waldemar's racket, and I had virtually knocked myself out on something that was good only to wake me up in the middle of the night in cold sweats. I was so nervous that I kept hearing noises, and that's bad police work. Just plain bad police work. A cop is supposed to hear all the real noises and none of the others.

I picked up Doc Waldemar's picture and set it straight, just in case he should sail in the front door and I would have to do a quick one out the back. Or the other way around. But every time I looked at the picture, I got a horrible sinking feeling. I started to yawn, and I kept on yawning until I jerked my eyes away from the picture. As in every photograph—there was nothing supernatural in that—the eyes followed me everywhere, met mine from every angle of the room. Try it on any photo that is shot with the subject gawking right square into the lens.

"This is crazy," I kept saying to myself, wiping my wet hands on my pants legs. "Maybe there is more to hypnosis than I've always believed, but nobody ever got hypnotized by a picture."

Then I'd look at those eyes, and things would start slipping.

I tried a different tact. Instead of argu-

ing against hypnosis itself, I'd think, "See here, you're a lieutenant of detectives, an officer of the law. That is the picture of a criminal you already helped convict." Fine, fine! Then I'd admit to myself that I was breaking and entering, so far only to be completely baffled, and I started yawning again.

I wrapped the picture up in a long Mexican shawl that hung in the corner, shoved it under the couch, and felt better. Whenever I thought of it down there, I itched all over, but I didn't have it following me around the room, at least.

The shawl gave me another idea. Doc was a pretty cold character, and if he took a mouthful of thumbtacks and hung a nice shawl up on the wall, it wasn't because he saw the trick aired on the woman's page. I ran my flash-beam around the place where the shawl hung, hoping to find a wall safe of some kind. What I found was an induction coil, right under the telephone cord.

"So Doc's monitoring the line with a bug," I thought, "and a very classy one, at that. Let's see where she goes."

I went back into the back room and followed the line. The mopboard had been taken up to lay it, and I had to take up the mopboard, too. A good thing I did; because it suddenly went into the wall and straight up. I got one chair pyramided on top of two more and kept pushing around on the ceiling until I found a place that would give. It was a "secret door" in no sense of the word. I boosted myself up the same as you go up into your own attic. In a better light, I'd have spotted it at once.

But if you're a screwball hypnotist—or a screwball victim with guilt and shame in your heart—are you going to go looking around the ceiling with a strong light? No. Doc's safety margin was very wide.

Up there was a good recording machine, a magazine of blank acetate records, and five that had been filled with some luckless son-of-a-gun's conversation. Or dozens of luckless sons-of-guns, since they were sixteen-inch disks. I was dying to try them, but this was not the place and time for it.

Neither did I want to go away and leave them. The back wall was ventilated with a shutter arrangement about eighteen inches wide. I took a piece of green string from the wrapping of the blank-record package, made myself a loop through the holes of the cut ones, and lowered them out the shutters. If I remembered that back yard rightly —and I thought I did—they would make an easy landing in some scrubby shrubbery below. When the string went slack, I pitched it through the crack and took another look around the room.

THE only other interesting thing was a cardboard box stuffed with notes, newspaper clippings, and letters. And when I dipped into this, I knew I had the goods on "Doctor" Pan Waldemar, S.S. and S.Q. (for Sing Sing and San Quentin).

Doc had already narrowed the field to four persons—a promising starlet in whom the studio already had a heavy promotion investment, a fading, dirty-minded and still wealthy male star, a wealthy producer's divorced wife, and a producer. This latter was the one with the buck teeth, and the stomach-pump incident was trivial to what Doc had already amassed.

Here were their original statements, which Doc was careful to get. He made each of them write him a letter stating that they knew he was an ex-convict, that they knew his crimes had been medical, that they were not asking him to "treat" them, that they had seen his sign when passing along Sunset Boulevard and were intrigued by it, that they had come in voluntarily, and without any inducement on Doc's part—and that they merely wished to *learn hypnosis themselves.*

It was just a "club," you understand. And that's all it was, too! The hyps and would-be hyps met here and chewed the fat and practiced on each other. They welcomed new members as new "subjects." No pretense would be made about Doc's record, of course. But he would dominate that collection of jerks like a Marine sergeant-major in a girls' school. He would be it. They would fail at auto-hypnosis, of course—I had read enough to know a skilful hyp can queer it as easily as he can induce it. In the

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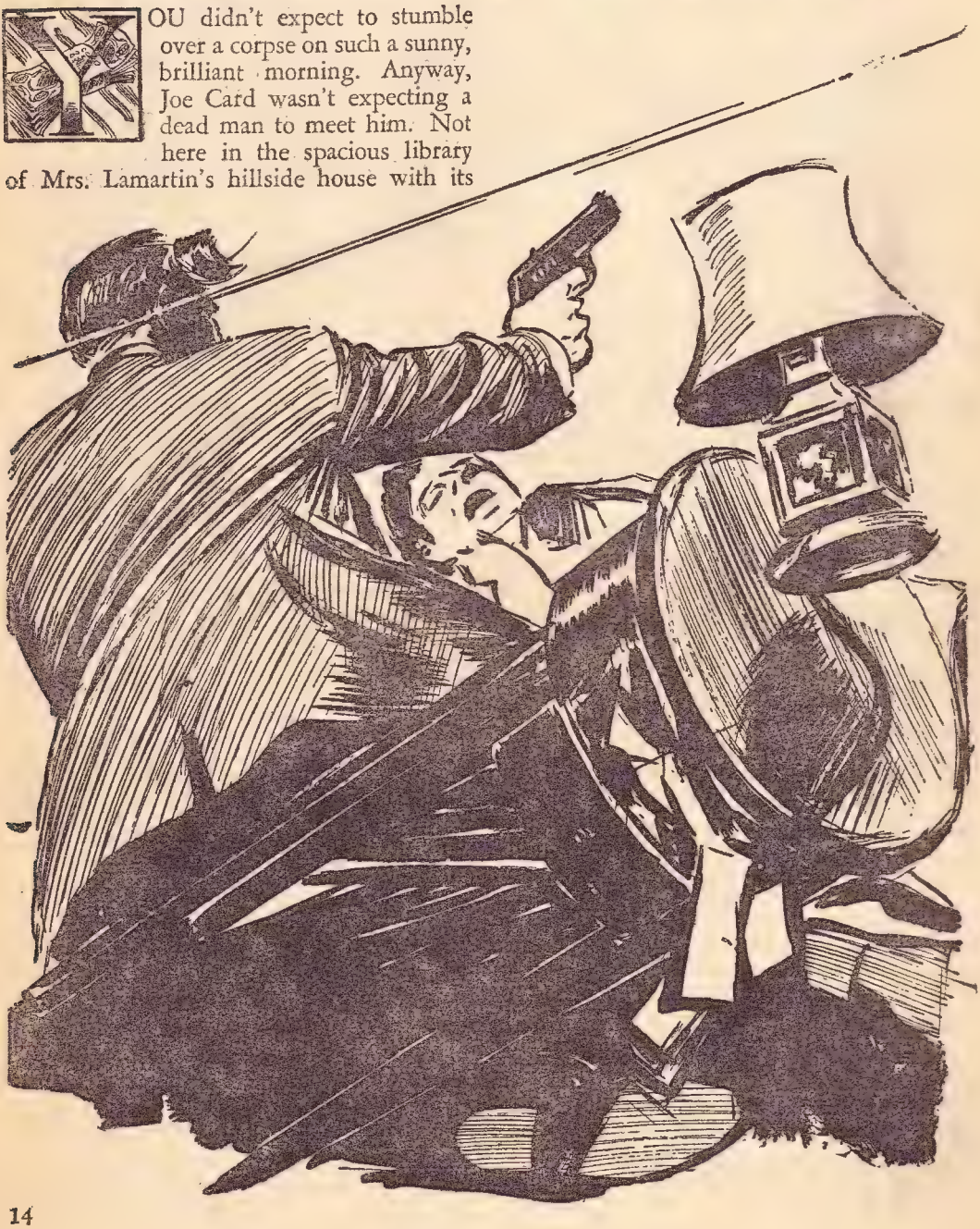
KILLERS HAVE GREEN EYES

YOU didn't expect to stumble over a corpse on such a sunny, brilliant morning. Anyway, Joe Card wasn't expecting a dead man to meet him. Not here in the spacious library of Mrs. Lamartin's hillside house with its



By
LAURENCE DONOVAN

Illustrated by Jay McArdle

"Most all private snoops are lowdown heels," the captain said, "but this makes you, Card, about the slimiest specimen that ever crawled!" And there was nothing that Card could do but take it, despite the anguish he saw in Mary Vincent's blue eyes

Card was sure it was a woman's hand that held the pistol, even as he fell.

low French windows facing out on the sea.

Joe Card had come upon quite a few corpses during ten hectic years of proving that but few private eyes could make friends with the regular coppers. Joe Card was one with whom the routine cops were considerably less friendly than with other shamuses.

He walked around the slightly paunchy dead man, keeping his hands carefully off of anything that might retain prints. It took but a glance to identify the corpse as that of Ramon Lamartin, who was the brother of Mrs. Millie Lamartin, young and sparkling. (The widow, not the corpse.)

Joe Card had become a steady visitor at the Lamartin menage during the past month. His best excuse for this was concerned with a $200,000 jewel theft claim held by Mrs. Lamartin against Card's current employer,

the Mayflower Insurance Co., Inc. Card was not on the company's regular staff of investigators.

Card was a private cop, and his past record did not recommend him for the conservative investigations into the private affairs of influential people. Mrs. Lamartin was "influential people," on the Mayflower books. Once he was assigned to the case, Joe Card had been put strictly upon his own.

This supplied the reason for his entering the Lamartin library at the unconventional hour of eight o'clock in the morning. Being on his own, Card had been having early morning dates for two weeks past with the charming but flippant Mary Vincent, or such was her name for this time and employment.

To get back to the defunct Ramon Lamartin, the corpse had one eye open with a sort of glazed expectancy that Joe Card must do something about this. The opened door of a wall safe directly above the dead man presented a motive which Card could not overlook.

Mrs. Lamartin, it appeared, had come to Santa Monica better supplied with rare gems than most of the cinema stars who week-ended or summered in scrabbled cottages along private Malibu Beach just below the Lamartin atrocity of Gothic architecture messed up with what was supposed to be something in Spanish mission style done in cracked white stucco.

JOE CARD quickly ascertained that Ramon Lamartin was really a corpse. Although the body was still warm, his heart had stopped. But when Card looked for the lethal wound, being careful to keep his hands off the body, he failed to find any blood, and the only possible wound was like a tiny blue puncture under the dead man's ear.

A glance showed that whatever jewels might have been in the wall safe had been removed. Card was profanely annoyed. Unless Mrs. Lamartin had tricked him, he had watched her deposit emeralds that would make you grit your teeth in that safe late the night before. They were a matched necklace and bracelet.

Card looked down at the corpse and spoke ironically.

"Mrs. Lamartin said you didn't know the combination of that safe, fella, and she swore she had recently changed the numbers so that she alone could get into it without blasting," stated Joe Card. "More than that, my departed friend, this interferes with an interesting matter that—"

Joe Card did not complete the sentence. His probing gray eyes had been drawn to the floor-length mirror in the wall near the safe. Card did not question the possible intent of the reflection he saw there.

The shamus fell flat, digging for his .38 under his arm. What he had seen was graceful and beautiful. It was a woman's temptingly rounded arm and shoulder, bare and white as far as he could see, but Card was more vitally concerned with the little pistol of shining blue steel that was pointed in his direction.

Card's fast reaction and his fall probably saved his life, although the blue steel weapon seemed to be discharged with a hiss rather than an explosion. Card rolled, his automatic coming up, but perhaps the would-be killer hadn't timed Card's dropping to the floor positively enough to be sure he hadn't been hit.

Card sprang to his feet as the woman's arm and weapon were withdrawn and there was a whispering rush of slippered feet along the hallway back of the library. Yet when Card reached the doorway, there was no evidence of anyone who might have desired his removal.

Seeing there were a number of doors along the hallway, Card decided his best immediate chance was to remain in the library.

He backtracked to a phone on a big desk and started to dial. His action was interrupted by a choked, little scream. Card replaced the phone receiver for the moment. The horrified cry came from Mary Vincent, secretary to Mrs. Lamartin.

Mary Vincent was Card's reason for this apparently untimely visit to the Lamartin library. The whiteness of her oval face and the widening of her fear-filled eyes did not detract in the least from what the girl had

to cause almost any man to meet her in any library at any time.

Mary averted her eyes from the dead man and reached Joe Card with a little rush of gladness, her arms going about him.

"Joe, darling!" she exclaimed. "You're early—if you hadn't been—I think I'd have died here alone! Is he—dead?"

Card snuggled the bright, bronze head to his shoulder and kissed her to try to still her trembling.

"He's dead—very dead," he said.

CARD wouldn't have minded a dead man every morning if it could have cuddled the delectable Mary Vincent so close to him. But this was more than his business now. It was police business.

"Go back through the garden the way you came, sweetheart," was Card's command. "I suppose Mrs. Lamartin is sleeping in as usual. If so, make contact with her and say nothing about what happened here. Let someone else find the corpus delicti."

"Yes, Joe," whispered Mary. "But—but how was Ramon killed? And how could the safe be open if Mrs. Lamartin hasn't been here?"

"Do as I say, Mary," directed Card. "Let me worry about that. There are ways to open such wall safes without having the combination. Come to think of it, I'm fading out myself. We're to be married in a few weeks, but I won't win any Boy Scout medal by having the cops know I was here at this hour and found the body. I'll go for a walk and come back to get the news of the murder in due time."

The girl nodded assent. She went out through the French windows. Card lingered but a few seconds. Something was puzzling him. He had been standing directly before a tall mirror. Some woman had discharged a weapon behind him.

"An' damned if there's a mark of a slug anywhere," murmured Card, as he absent-mindedly picked up a small sheet of glazed writing paper from the floor.

Card faded back toward the window exit. He noticed several other sheets of glazed paper lying upon the desk and several that had apparently been blown to the floor. Card picked these up and restored them to their place on the desk.

Then he noticed what appeared to be a slight blood stain on the corner of one paper. Card looked once more at the dead man. He put the writing paper in his pocket and went out.

HAVING heard no warning sirens, Joe Card loitered along Beach Street where there were several small shops. He lingered at a small bar where the cognac was nearly as old as advertised.

Card speculated upon which of the Lamartin household would come upon the body of Ramon Lamartin and the opened safe. This would probably be Lucas, the butler, or Katie, the Irish housemaid.

As for the others, Mrs. Lamartin, widow and willing, as Card judged her, she was undoubtedly Latin and she had been widely traveled. The late departed Drew Lamartin had held some sort of political post in North Africa at the time of his death.

There was an adopted daughter, Celeste, and Mrs. Lamartin was too adroit at keeping the lovely Celeste in the background. The widow was strictly a free soul and, at home or outside parties, she always managed to shuffle Celeste away from the danger zone of her own possible suitors. Celeste was a natural blonde; the analytical eye of Joe Card had not overlooked her abundant charm.

Jose Sebo was a cousin, one of those vaguely distant cousins, who appeared to have the inside track with the widowed Mrs. Lamartin. If Joe Card had been casting about for a suspect, robbery or murder, the polished, dark-skinned Jose Sebo would have been his guess.

"But Jose Sebo hasn't the kind of skin you'd love to touch," said Card as he came from the little bar into Beach Street and had grim remembrance of a white, shapely arm and shoulder, with a weapon that had been pointed at his back.

To be sure, there was Mary Vincent, and Card tried to put her out of his mind. A few years ago he would have hooted at the idea of a private dick falling for an out-and-

out jewel thief to the extent of letting a case go bust to save her.

But he had fallen for such a girl, then known as Rosa Fanchon, and she was now secretary to Mrs. Lamartin. Card had considered it good policy to see that Rosa Fanchon disappear from Chi and take up a new identity out here on the Coast. By pulling the proper wires he had made Mary Vincent an employable young woman without a record.

Card hadn't any reason to regret his softness. The girl had not been a klepto and she had been strictly on the spot, with a dying brother, when she had lifted a few diamonds back in Chi. It was consolation to Joe Card to know that more than one tough copper had gone all out for girls who hadn't been on the up-and-up, and Card knew some of them that had made damn' good wives.

Still on the alert for a street extra or a radio bulletin on the Ramon Lamartin murder, Card had not for one minute permitted Mary Vincent's past "mistake" to enter into the present ticklish set-up that would soon come spilling out of the rich Widow Lamartin's household.

The good cognac warming him also loosened his mind. It came to him that Jose Sebo, the somewhat distant cousin of Mrs. Lamartin, had apparently been dependent upon Mrs. Lamartin's generosity for his bed, board, and excellent taste in dress. Also, that Jose Sebo had recently been playing a little game of his own that would put him in disfavor with the sparkling widow.

Putting it plainly, Joe Card had come upon the blonde and lovely Celeste in rather interesting proximity to Jose Sebo in some of the quieter and more private corners of the Lamartin grounds. It was apparent, even to the brain of a private eye who would fall for a pretty, one-time jewel thief, that Mrs. Lamartin would be, to say the least, highly indignant over these goings-on between the adopted daughter from North Africa, Celeste, and the probably adopted cousin, Jose Sebo.

These angles of his assigned hunt for $200,000 in jewels on which insurance must soon be paid had been sharpened by today's little matter of murder and added robbery. By Mrs. Lamartin's own admission and his conservative guess, the emeralds missing from the wall safe could clip the Mayflower Co., Inc., for an added hundred grand.

Card's thinking, sharpened by good cognac, was dying out. He was in a small side street off the Beach front when he halted and rubbed his eyes. A small jewelry shop had but a narrow display window Over the window it had the usual signs, with an added—

COPYING VALUABLE JEWELS
FOR PROTECTION OUR
SPECIALTY

THE window display could have been imitations, but good. It was the baldish, thin man with the long, rattish nose that really clicked in Joe Card's memory. Card would have passed on. But he swung on hard heels and turned into the shop.

"Simon Draper!" Card's voice was edged enough to cut the smile from the little jeweler's tight lips. "Well! Well! Let me think. It was in forty-three that the big dough rolled in for cutting big ones into little ones of tool-cutter size—"

The jeweler put out a thin hand. He spoke quickly.

"You wouldn't believe it, Card, so help me, you wouldn't," said Simon Draper "But it pays to be respectable—"

"Respectable?" grunted Card. "Copying jewels a specialty? No, Simon, I wouldn't believe it and I don't. This hole-in-the-wall business isn't your kind of dough. What's the racket, Simon?"

Simon Draper rubbed his blue-veined hands and beamed.

"You wouldn't think, Card, that so many dopey stars would be wearin' Simon's rocks an' pearls an' stuff like that to hurt the eyes of the suckers watchin' 'em talk in the mike at Grauman's Chinese gift joint, while they are keepin' the real McCoy locked in safety deposit—"

Knowing Simon, he could go on like a radio announcer with a commercial, so Card cut him off.

She looked pathetic, crushed, as the copper led her from the room.

"Yeah—yeah, Simon, I see," stated Card. "Cheap stuff I'd say for the slickest fence that ever stood the Chi coppers on their ears. Doin' a little lendin' on the side, I suppose. Say! Couldn't be that you've seen some nice green rocks this morning, maybe a bracelet and a necklace?"

Simon Draper's eyes darted. This appear-

ance of Joe Card might be unfortunate. You had to play ball with Card if he once tumbled to your racket. Simon seemed all at once aiming to please.

Simon walked over and shoved up a side window as if he needed more air. He spread his hands.

"So help me, I didn't see such green stones today, but it was two days ago when a young dame that filled your eyes come in with like what you said, a bracelet an' necklace," stated Simon. "She was wantin' 'em copied an' in a hurry, she said. Maybe they was a hundred grand an' maybe twice that, but—"

"But what?" snapped Card.

"But some other fellow had already done some slick copying," said Simon. "So help me, Card, they were phonies of the best, but all phonies, maybe a two-C job, and good."

Card's mind was racing.

"A young dame, you said, if you're leveling, Simon?"

"Yeah, a cutie, an' scared like as if she had maybe borrowed them emeralds."

"Know her if you saw her again?" grated Card.

"Lookit, Card, I'm stayin' legit, but do I want my mug plastered into the newspapers? Them Chi cops has good memories—"

"You won't be mugged, Simon," assured Card. "What'd this young dame look like?"

"Cutie, what I said," replied Simon. "Face like a flower with big blue eyes an' the kind o' red hair they don't call red, it havin' grown natural. Sort o' bronze like. Noticed she had real ruby earrings, but refined, not the show-off stuff—le' me see, she didn't give me her name, but give me a phone number—"

Card's heart was a chunk of ice and his throat was tying up so he didn't want to speak. He'd have bet ten, five, or even there wasn't another girl in the whole Santa Monica and Hollywood set-up that could have been as exactly described as Mary Vincent.

Card's bitter thinking was abruptly cut off by what he believed was a falling down of Simon Draper's side window. It was not the window that had fallen. It was Simon Draper.

The crackling jolt that could have been the window was accompanied by a wisp of blue smoke that could come only from a small silenced pistol. Simon Draper seemed to stare at Joe Card with accusing eyes for a space of seconds. Then the light died out of them and Simon fell forward with a blue hole in his left temple.

Card cursed with round oaths as he slipped out through the front doorway. His .38 was in his hand and he swore more violently when he discovered he was blocked from getting back to the side window from the front because of a shoe-shining stand that was built into what had been the space between the buildings.

The shoe shiner rolled his eyeballs and showed white teeth but that was all. Card took a long running jump, landed on top of the stand and dropped into the narrow space. Limping on a bruised ankle, he saw there was no reason to go on. Only a few yards away, a space that had concealed the killer ended on the edge of the yellow sand beach where scores of bathers who never went into the water were sunning themselves.

Card gave it up. Five minutes later he stayed at the edge of a crowd jamming into Simon Draper's little jewelry shop. At this moment Card wanted nothing whatever to do with this second murder of the morning. His own thoughts and emotions were like rough-edged, ragged wheels grinding all the way from his heart to his brain.

Mary Vincent?

He holstered his .38. He had heard a copper announce this was the second one of the morning. It was time for Joe Card to show up at the home of the widow Lamartin.

Captain Cragg paced up and down the Lamartin library. His features well fitted his name. He appeared to have as much imagination as a trained seal.

Cragg, his print men, the M. E., and half a dozen other coppers had herded the household into the library. Card walked in leisurely, paused with an exclamation as any

other man would, suddenly confronted with a corpse and a library full of police.

"What goes on, Cragg?" inquired Card, arranging a rosebud plucked from the garden, on his lapel.

Cragg stared at him and his heavy lips scarcely opened as he spoke.

"Can't you be in any man's town more than a few days without leaving a trail of corpses?" rasped Cragg. "Okay, Card. I suppose you know all the answers to this one.

Card looked at the raging Captain Cragg with gray eyes that were much too mild.

"All the answer I see, Captain, is the well-known corpse and a busted safe. That is in your line, Cragg, not mine."

Card's eyes drifted. Sweet-faced Mary Vincent stood beside Mrs. Lamartin, the pretty widow. Perhaps Celeste was not thinking clearly but she was standing close to Jose Sebo. The butler and the maid and several other servants were huddled in a group near the doorway.

"We've known you've been snooping around for a month or more, Card," exploded Captain Cragg. "I've just heard we have another homicide on our hands, a jeweler named Simon Draper, near Beach Street. Maybe you'd know something about that, too?"

Card tamped the end of a cigarette on the back of his hand, lighted it and took a deep draw. As always, he was studying eyes. Come to think of it, Mrs. Lamartin's eyes had a greenish shade although her coloring and hair were very dark. And Celeste had bright eyes that went with her blond hair that seemed to Card to be more greenish than blue. Card thought he must have imagined it but the black eyes of Jose Sebo somehow had taken on a greenish cast as they were narrowed looking at him.

CARD really looked at Mary Vincent after he had studied all of the others. Her eyes were bright and blue and frightened. Her small hands were clenched until Card would have wagered the nails were biting the skin of her palms. But while there was fright there, perhaps terror, Card could see only a vague puzzlement.

"It's a hell of a note," growled Cragg. "This man's dead. Mebbe it's some new kind of poison. But he ain't bled none and it looks like someone had used a hypo on his neck."

Card passed up the mention of a woman's hand that had fired a weapon that has hissed rather than exploded and had left no trace of either a leaden slug or a steel-jacketed bullet.

It was at this juncture that he cocked his eyes upon the widow Lamartin. The name of Simon Draper, the little jeweler that had been murdered, had just been mentioned.

There was something in Mrs. Lamartin's eyes that rang a bell of warning in Card's mind. Something that compelled him to act upon an impulse that might cost him all of his future happiness. He knew there was but one thing for him to do and he had to make it look as if he were getting out from under the heat personally.

"I can give you the most likely suspect, Captain Cragg," he said quietly. "Take my word for it and I'll come up with the proof. Mrs. Lamartin's secretary, Mary Vincent, should be locked up now. "If necessary, I'll sign the complaint. It will be suspicion of murder."

Card could not turn away quickly enough to miss the terrible anguish in Mary Vincent's blue eyes, like that of a child who had trusted someone and had been cruelly slapped.

Card hadn't expected to become popular by his accusation, but he was jolted from a direction that came as a surprise. Card could feel a frost of contempt for him settling within the room.

Into this spoke Captain Cragg, who didn't seem to have had so much as a soft spot in his head when he was a baby. Cragg's growl was for Card alone and it was a revelation.

"Most all private snoops are low-down heels, but this makes you about the slimiest specimen that ever crawled," said Cragg through gritted teeth. "You fall flat on digging up a jewel insurance case, so you're snake enough to try to pin this case upon a little dame you've been kiddin' along since

she got jammed up helping her sick brother in Chi."

Card almost choked. This was the first intimation he had that the hard-boiled Captain Cragg had known anything of Mary Vincent's record in Chi. But Card had to let it lie as it was.

"Okay, Billings!" grunted Cragg. "Take the little lady to headquarters, an' the Lord help you, Card, if you can't back up the dirtiest out I've ever known a snooper to try."

Mary Vincent looked pathetic, crushed, as a young copper conducted her from the room.

It was tough for Carl to take, but it might turn out that he could make this okay with the girl later, although he didn't have much hope.

The unfeeling police M. E. was finishing with his once-over of such mortal remains as there were of Ramon Lamartin. The M. E. had made several quick tests, examined the dead man's eyes and announced it would require an autopsy to reveal the real cause of death.

"No evidence of cyanide, curare, or any well-known poisons," said the M. E. "He could have been killed by a bullet in his brain so far as there are any visible reactions."

Card's mind was upon Mary Vincent, now being taken to a cop's radio car. He knew the girl was stunned by his accusation. But it was clear enough she had consulted Simon Draper, the murdered jeweler, about copying emeralds.

"And she didn't know they were phonies or she would not have taken them there," mused Card silently, his eyes roving from one face to another.

Card had given no special attention to Lucas, the butler with a mask-like face, or to Katie, the Irish maid who had a cast in one eye that probably made her believe her soul had been sold to the devil.

Mrs. Lamartin stepped toward Captain Cragg, and the widow's lovely mouth curled with scorn as she glanced at Joe Card.

"I'll put up the bail bond for Mary, whatever it is," stated Mrs. Lamartin. "The charge against her is ridiculous."

Captain Cragg shook his head regretfully.

"There can be no bail, Mrs. Lamartin, for suspicion of murder," said Cragg, boring into Card with gimlet eyes. "But I'll try and fix it for a quick preliminary hearing before a judge this afternoon, and I'm thinkin' it can be fixed up then."

CARD flashed his eyes upon Jose Sebo and the beautiful Celeste. The delectable blonde moved away from Sebo as if she realized Mrs. Lamartin might object to her apparent appropriation of the distant cousin.

Captain Cragg snorted then.

"I'm not swallowing this business about Mary Vincent, so I want all of you to stick around until the hearing is over," he said.

Card might have imagined it. But it seemed to him that Lucas, the wooden-faced butler, and Jose Sebo moved quickly, as if welcoming the opportunity to leave the library. Jose Sebo glanced at his wristwatch and was in the doorway. Mrs. Lamartin and Celeste crowded alongside Sebo.

It happened as if it had been exactly timed. Card would have sworn a timed fire bomb had been somewhere in the dead Ramon Lamartin's clothes or close to him. There was not much of an explosion, but there was a running flash of blue fire.

"By hell!" grated Captain Cragg. "What—"

Within half a second the body of Ramon Lamartin was burning and the fire ran in a circle around the corpse. Joe Card may have been all that Captain Cragg had indicated, and the kind of louse who would send his best girl friend on her last long mile, but at this moment Card proved he was something else.

Others, including Cragg and his coppers were beaten back by the fierce heat of the fire. But Card jerked his coat up over his head and face and dived toward the burning body.

"Come back, you damned fool!" bellowed Cragg.

But Card was scorching his own arms as he lifted the corpse, and the blue flame licked around his own body. Cragg swore

heavily and other coppers appeared to have had their minds stopped up.

But Card smashed through a half-opened door at the end of the long library. There was a thud, then the sizzling of water pouring from a shower.

When Captain Cragg reached the bathroom doorway, the partly burned body of Ramon Lamartin lay under a pouring shower. Card was smearing his scorched arms and face with vaseline he had seized from a medicine cabinet.

"You gone clean off your nut, Card?" demanded Cragg. "Makin' a hospital case over a man already dead for no good reason?"

Card made a wry face and looked down at the dead man whose clothes were but charred fragments.

"I'm suggesting there's enough left for an autopsy," clipped Card angrily. "And I wouldn't suggest looking for any mysterious poison. Ramon Lamartin was killed as if he had been hit in the brain with a bullet, only your M. E. won't find any trace of any bullet."

Captain Cragg stared at Card.

"Do all private snoops go crazy or is it being crazy that makes them snoops?" grunted Cragg.

During the next ten seconds Cragg seemed to have verification that Card was looney one way or the other. Card's eyes had turned toward the bathroom window outside which a police car was just starting down toward the Roosevelt Highway.

Liberally covered with vaseline and blistered by burns, Joe Card upset Captain Cragg as he sprang for the door. Card had seen a light truck used on the Lamartin place move out on another steep driveway that converged with the other road down near the Roosevelt Highway that separated the Lamartin place from Malibu Beach.

JOE CARD was half-blinded by the fire that had seared his face and hair. The private dick was probably at the lowest level at which any shamus had ever arrived. He was under the profane opinion of Captain Cragg and his homicide detail. Moreover, he had deliberately placed himself on a level from which it seemed impossible to climb back into the favor of Mary Vincent.

Paradoxically, Joe Card had arrived at a place in life and still clung to an emotion that would have brought a snort of skepticism from Captain Cragg. Joe Card was head over ears in love with Mary Vincent. What he had just done was the only out that he could think up on the spur of the moment to save the life of the girl who had in a time past been a jewel thief.

Police guns blasted behind him. Chunks of lead chewed at the framework of the kitchen door. Card guessed that the slap on the shoulder that spun him half way around must have been a slug but he kept on going.

He was at the broad side of a triangle. Almost hidden by the spreading foliage of pepper trees, a light truck was gaining headway toward the Roosevelt Highway. On the other side of the triangle a white police radio car, carrying two persons, was shooting toward the same highway. The meeting of the two machines appeared inevitable.

Blinking one eye open enough to shoot, Card cut loose with his .38, hammering slugs into the speeding truck. It seemed useless through the thick branches of the pepper trees.

The hue and cry, topped by the shouted profanity of Captain Cragg, was behind him. Card could see Malibu Beach. He could see scantily clad sun bathers scattering, and he could mark almost the exact spot where the two plunging vehicles must converge.

Traveling through the short line of the triangle, heedless of his own hurts, Card emptied his automatic, then flung the useless weapon in the general direction of the speeding truck.

He was close enough to catch a glimpse at what seemed no more than a tiny white bird that darted from the truck toward the police car. He saw the flame of the copper's gun belching from a side window.

The white object, whatever it was, apparently won the race. The police car careened into the trees and shrubbery at one side, going over with a crash that sent a chill all the way through Joe Card. He

wasn't sure whether the light truck had slowed or whether a crazy driver had taken a chance at jumping.

At the lower apex of the triangle, just before skidding into the Roosevelt Highway the two machines came together with a splintering of metal and glass. Card cursed wildly, reversed his direction and went in pursuit of that flying figure that had leaped from the death truck.

The private dick had but little hope that either the copper or Mary Vincent could be alive in that tangled mass of steel but he gave all he had into overtaking the figure that had left the death truck. He was so close to the fleeing driver of the truck that he really saw the small white object hurtling toward him.

There was scarcely a sting, because of his heated blood, when the point of the missile was buried in the muscles of his left shoulder. He heard a desperate cry not far ahead and he went plunging into a gully, landing on top of a squirming, fighting opponent whose hand now swung a gleaming knife.

Card was all the way beyond the border of pain. If the knife slashed into his flesh he did not feel it. He beat the other down with his terribly burned knuckles. He struck and struck again until the driver of the truck lay limp and quiet.

He straightened slowly, stiffly. He must get to that wrecked police car. The man he had beaten down was Lucas, the butler, with the mask-like face, that was now a welter of blood and bruises.

Card heard a faint cry from the overturned truck. He paused only long enough to rescue the woman who had been pinned there and who might have burned if the truck tank had exploded.

Card was not in the least surprised. Even in her frustrated fury, the face of the Widow Lamartin was still beautiful.

He could hear Captain Cragg and the others crashing through the bushes and shrubbery behind him.

"Put a guard over her, Cragg!" rasped Joe Card. "I think you'll find a couple of grand in jewels tightly laced to her body. There probably will be another grand in emeralds hidden in the shop of the dead Simon Draper. I have other business, Cragg."

THE young copper who had driven the police car was dead. A queer white cone of pointed paper had been driven into his neck.

Joe Card held the partly conscious Mary Vincent in his arms ignoring any pain he may have felt. When she would have pulled away, he kissed her.

"What the hell is this?" demanded Captain Cragg. "I don't make you, Card. You were sending your girl straight to the gas chamber and now—"

"Shut up!" rapped out Joe Card and held the girl more fiercely. "I was only trying to save her life and I almost missed it at that. They wouldn't have let her live after having sent her to Simon Draper's shop with the phony emeralds. They were on to me, Cragg, and they knew more than I suspected. In a few more hours the Widow Lamartin and Lucas, her North African confederate, would have been in the clear. It was neat, too damn' neat.

"Simon Draper would have shared in the value of the stolen jewels and the Widow Lamartin would have collected the insurance. That was why when they found out I had come so close it was a matter of safety and profit that Simon Draper should die.

"I think Lucas shot Simon Draper because Mrs. Lamartin apparently was the only one who had the secret of the *coniferal* air pistol."

Cragg muttered an oath and stared at Joe Card.

"Have you gone off your beam altogether?" grated Captain Cragg. "And what is this you call the *coniferal?*"

"It was why that fire bomb was set to destroy Ramon Lamartin's body so there would be no autopsy. There would have been no poison. The point of the *coniferal* had penetrated his brain and had then been removed, like I'm removing this, Captain Cragg."

Card's hand caught what appeared to be a tightly rolled white cone imbedded in the muscles of his left shoulder and pulled it free. It was dagger-pointed and as sharp as

a needle. The finest steel could not have been more resistant in the shape it was rolled, that of a cone. Yet when Card loosened it in his hand it slowly unrolled and appeared to be but a blank sheet of white paper except for the stain of blood where his shoulder had been penetrated.

"I have the one that matches this that came from the throat of Ramon Lamartin," he said. "It is a natural plastic that was discovered in North Africa and was used as a weapon. See. It can be torn across like this, yet it was so glazed that when it is tightly rolled it will serve either the purpose of a knife in a man's hand or a deadly missile from an air gun. Mrs. Lamartin used it in an air pistol."

"Now I've heard everything," said Captain Cragg, "and I still don't believe it."

The police M. E. at that moment removed a similar cone from the throat of the dead copper who had been driving the car. He flattened it into an apparently harmless white glazed paper.

"I don't know what the native name for it would be," said Card, "but the few Americans who came in contact with it gave it the name of *coniferal* meaning the cone of death."

Mary Vincent stirred in Joe Card's arms. One hand crept about his neck.

Cragg said: "Maybe you're not the heel I thought you were, Card. I thought you were throwing your girl to the dogs."

"Her?" And there was a world of meaning in Card's voice. "I wasn't aware that you knew of her past record, Cragg, and it would have made little difference if I had known, but I would have gone to the wolves first. I had to think fast and get her to safety and I could think of no safer place than in your Santa Monica hoosegow. As it turned out, they were working faster than I thought."

"I don't like private snoops and I never will like a private snoop," gritted Captain Cragg, "but here is my hand, Card. I'll regard it as a privilege and an honor to stand up as best man, and God help you if you don't go through with it. I'll have my own squad beat the tar out of you."

Joe Card was in intense pain yet he did not feel it.

How could a man feel pain with soft lips pressed to his mouth, with brimming eyes flush with his own, with a whisper: "I knew all the time, Joe, you'd make it come out right."

Tops in Reading Entertainment

★

THE SPEED MAGAZINES

ONE TRAIL TO

If the truck-driver hadn't kicked the cats, he wouldn't have been killed, and, if he hadn't been killed, several other people wouldn't have been killed, but untold more thousands of people would undoubtedly have died!

MURDER . . . .

By T. K. BURNHAM

Illustrated by
Paul H. H. Stone

The man from the red car caught the girl before she had fairly started.

"DON'T look now, or if you do, leave us go on an' make believe we didn't see it," groaned "Bumps" McCarthy, striving without success to avert his eyes from the two men lying beside the highway.

Joe Lake looked and braked the coupé to a screeching stop. He knew death when he saw it. When he didn't see it, he could smell it at any distance. For that he was the *Telegram's* ace police reporter and murder hound.

"Grab a shot, Bumps, before the road's cluttered up with sightseers," ordered Joe Lake. "C'mon! Looks as if these two guys picked out a lonely dump to rub each other out. Hey, Bumps! Off to one side an' don't get your big feet on the tracks!"

"Grab a shot?" moaned Bumps McCarthy.

"An' me just fresh out of plates, remember? Used 'em all up on that refugee ship at Astoria. An' the killin' turns out to be nothin' but an accident."

Joe Lake rumpled his rusty hair and slanted his eyes both directions along the Columbia River highway. Mountain dusk was beginning to deepen here outside the Portland city limits.

"Funny," grumbled Joe and added, "but a swell break at that, if it could only turn out to be something bigger than it looks like it is. That ragged old guy's nobody more important than a salmon-smoking bum from the looks of his clothes, an' he got it right between the eyes."

Bumps swore at his useless camera, sidestepped some tireprints in the white clay where the road was being repaired, and screwed up his round mouth.

"Listen, Joe. Leave us go away now. I do not like it when we find bodies without the presence of the law. The last time you hid out the corpse the homicide fellas was real mad about it."

Joe Lake whistled softly, bending over the dead man who apparently had done the shooting with a cheap, nickeled revolver lying beside his hand.

"Hadn't been a car along since it happened, or if there was the driver didn't stop," said Joe. "And—say! This fellow that did the shooting had his head based in with that salmon spear! His brains were spilled an' he died instantly."

"Just before he shot the other fellow, or was it the other way around, Joe?" asked Bumps plaintively. "I said leave us go away now before you get an idea—"

BUT Joe Lake was jumping across the shallow ditch below the road shoulder toward a green fringe of salmon berry bushes. The old and shriveled derelict trying to scuttle away tripped over his own flapping pants leg and fell down.

Joe was upon him, gripping his greasy collar and dragging him to his feet. The man's shrunken, bearded face was screwed tight with fear.

"It wasn't me done it, so help me!" his voice quavered on a high note. "It was the cats! I couldn't stop Tully! He was nuts about them cats! That trucker oughtn't have kicked at 'em, an' they was sick anyway—"

"Come 'ere, Bumps!" interrupted Joe, giving the old codger a shake that rattled his teeth. "Find a spare plate an' mug him. Chances are he's our rooster."

"No! No, mister!" The derelict screamed it out thinly. "It was on account o' them cats follerin' the truck. You gotta believe me. An' Tully went after him with the fish spear when he kicked the cats an' one o' them didn't git up—"

"So the one that's shot is Tully, an' he cracked the other fellow's head with the spear, huh?" rasped Joe, keeping an eye upon the still empty highway. "An' there were two cats following a truck? So where's the cats, an' if that guy with the busted skull is the trucker, where is the truck the cats were following. Come clean, an' what's your name?"

"Me, I'm Boodlehoofer," whined the old fellow, rubbing his grubby chin with one claw-like hand.

"I thought you said Boodlehoofer," grunted Joe.

"Yup, but folks call me Siwash because—"

"You'll do for a Siwash, Siwash," cut in Joe. "An' when you saw your friend Tully shot dead by this guy you say is a trucker, you up an' break in his dome with the salmon spear, is that it?"

"Nope—nope—I knowed I hadn't oughtta stuck around, but I ain't wantin' to leave poor Tully layin' out there, an' maybe he ain't dead after all—"

"He's dead, Siwash, and you know it," came in Joe. "Could it be the other way around? You saw Tully conk this other fellow who isn't a trucker, or there would be a truck, and you up with that cheap gun and blasted Tully. That's it, isn't it? And your fingerprints will be on the gun."

"I didn't do it either!" Old Siwash started shaking and his one suspender strap broke so he had to hang onto his baggy pants. "I put the gun down again when I seen that trucker wasn't breathin'. Tully hadn't oughtta kilt him even if he kicked the cats."

"Lordy!" grumbled Bumps. "This can go

Siwash would never buy any more white mule from Dirty Nell!

around and around. Joe, maybe there were cats. I saw tracks that could've been them. Ah! there was a truck with big tires started up from there right after it rained awhile ago. The tracks was washed."

"Been tryin' to tell you about them cats, mister," whined Siwash. "Me an' Tully has been smokin' salmon an' sellin' it at six cents a pound, an' they say it's sold again at three dollars a pound back east, an' who gits—"

Joe stopped Siwash's wandering with a snap that brought him around and headed him out into the road. Joe saw that the man with the broken head could be a trucker. His overalls had been white.

There were tracks, although one of the dashing Oregon showers had pretty well obliterated them. Because of the rainy season, the highway was free of traffic.

"Right there was where this fellow kicked Tully's cats," pointed Siwash with a trembling finger. "Couldn't make out why them two cats, one being yellow on' the other'n white, took out after that truck nohow, it bein' a big gasoline tank truck."

"Look, Siwash," said Joe patiently. "Where's the cats? And where's the truck? Before someone comes along and the law puts a finger on you."

"Oh, them cats was took away by the fellow, one o' the men in the red car that was followin' the truck an' shot Tully for hittin' the trucker so hard," got out Siwash all in one long breath.

"Cats? A truck? A red car?" Joe faced Siwash around. "Some man in the car shot your pardner Tully?"

"Could be, Joe," said Bumps, bending down and studying the slippery, white clay. "Looks like a car stopped an' started behind the truck tracks. Can't make out though if there are really cat tracks here—"

"One of the fellows out of the red car rubbed 'em out when that black-haired gal jumped outta the car an' tried to run but was brung back by the man who—"

HERE we go again," muttered Joe. "We have cats, a truck, two men in a red car, and now a girl with black hair who was in the car. Say! If this is the trucker, who drove the truck away? And why didn't they see you, Siwash?"

"It started to rain just after that fellow grabbed up the cats an' put the gun that kilt Tully beside the trucker, an' it rained so hard I couldn't see very good, mister. I was scared anyway, an' stayed hid in them bushes,' an' I'd have run off but we had salmon smokin' I hafta to look after."

Joe Lake shook his head and pulled at his rusty mop.

"How long since all this happened, Siwash? And who drove the truck away?"

"After he kicked the mud around some back of the truck, one fellow from the red car got on the seat an' drove it off up there to that side road where he turned, an' I heard you fellows comin' along then an' I still don't think Tully oughtta kilt that trucker even if he did think a lot o' them two cats—"

Joe Lake disregarded Siwash's continued yammering for a full minute as he walked around the two bodies. When he suddenly glanced at the bushes fringing the road. Bumps McCarthy held out his hands.

"No, Joe. No. I ain't helpin' move them bodies. Maybe we'd be getting ourselves mixed up in some real trouble. Maybe the county cops will come onto us and—"

"You and Siwash carry the bodies over into the berry bushes while I collect a sample of this mud in the road," interrupted Joe Lake. "If there were cats, of which I'm not sure, they don't like gasoline. Snap into it, Bumps! And you, Siwash!"

"Me? Touch dead men? No sirree! I'm gittin' outta here—"

Joe Lake took him firmly by the neck.

"Help move the bodies, Siwash. Then we'll take you with us. Step on it, Bumps."

The veteran police reporter scooped up a double handful of the white clay about where the rear of the truck must have been when it stopped. He put the earth to his nose, but all he could smell was the usual oil fumes of a paved road. He stuffed the mud in the pocket of the car.

Bumps was wiping sweat from his troubled, red brow.

"You think the bodies won't be discovered before our edition time tomorrow, Joe? If the county cops—"

"That's the general idea, Bumps. Siwash, what became of the red car after you say the tank truck turned into that mountain road?"

"Reckon it follered right after the truck, mister. They ain't gittin' far up that road neither. It don't go no place but to Dirty Nell's cabin where she makes white mule likker."

"Let me see, that rain was only about ten or fifteen minutes ago?" questioned Joe. "That when all this business of the cats and the red car happened, Siwash?"

"Yup, reckon so. I guess maybe that gal was tryin' to git away from them fellows. Looked to me like they was havin' a fight in the red car as it went away with the cats, but maybe it was the cats, them bein' kind o' wild from eatin' too much salmon."

For once Joe Lake felt that he had about all of the evidence he could sort out in his mind. He made sure the two bodies were hidden from the highway as he got into the coupé's seat.

"Whatever it turns out to be, it's coming

dark fast, so we'll beat out the morning sheets on this," said Joe. "Siwash, squeeze yourself between us, and if we meet anyone, keep your head down. We'll take a run up that side road, and if you've been lying, Siwash, I'll personally take you apart."

"I don't think he's lyin'," grunted Bumps." But I don't like this. If the killers are desperate, and they knocked off a poor gink like Tully, it was to keep his trap shut. Maybe they would get the same idea about us—"

From high in the evergreens on the mountain side road ahead of them sounded a muffled explosion. It was just light enough to see thick black smoke roll up over the high tops of the spruce.

"By crickety!" exclaimed Siwash. "I knowed Dirty Nell's still would blow up

There was a single hiss from the silenced gun, but that was enough.

some day! You didn't dast to smoke nigh that white mule she makes. I'm hopin' it didn't though, 'cause that's the cheapest white mule on the Columbia."

The blast had not been a still. Joe Lake knew the signs too well. That rolling black smoke was burning gasoline. He had an idea it must be the truck that had been followed by the cats, and later by the red car Siwash had mentioned.

Still, and Joe Lake kept a keen eye upon the turnoff into the side road ahead, no red car appeared following the explosion. Nor was such a car in evidence when he sent the coupe shooting around hairpin turns until it was directly above the blazing furnace in a shallow canyon, a fiery metal dissolving blaze of what had been a tank truck.

JOE LAKE led the way, climbing down a dizzy drop of mossy rocks dripping with water. The rising heat stopped him. It was Bumps behind him who exclaimed.

"Joe! The truck driver! He got out! There he is, hanging onto that cedar bush! Maybe he was tossed out when the truck turned over!"

With some trouble, Joe climbed over to the cedar bush. Old Siwash was spry for his age. He was right behind Joe while Bumps puffed and puffed, but gave it up.

"By crickety!" Old Siwash's eyes bugged. "He ain't holdin' onto that 'ere bush, mister. That fellow's deader'n them others. The whole top o' his head has been blowed off."

Even Joe Lake's hard-boiled stomach was revolted. If this had been the driver of the truck, there was adequate reason why the tanker had been hurled to the bottom of the canyon. It looked as if the man's skull had been split by a close-up shot with a gun of heavy caliber.

"That's him," said Siwash. "The fellow that took the cats. Or maybe he ain't an' it was the other fellow."

Bumps called up then, "Joe! This ain't a gas truck! The fire's dying down! That was only the fuel tank! If it had been loaded with gas the whole shebang would have been blown to bits!"

Joe Lake could see that. But when he made a quick examination of the third dead man, he swore under his breath. There were no papers, nothing on him. Even the laundry marks had been ripped from his clothes.

"Which means this guy was bumped off when the truck was stopped and before it was sent down into the canyon," stated Joe thoughtfully.

Just as Bumps called out, "Lookit, Joe! Hear that? There's that other car. It's stopped by our heap. Joe, I'm going back up there."

"Hold it, Bumps!" Joe was listening to the sounds some hundred yards up and beyond their range of vision. "Three dead men are enough! There, they're driving on down the road! C'mon! We can't do anything for this fellow. Siwash, how far is it up the side road to this Dirty Nell's place?"

"Not more'n another mile, mister. But—I don't think I'm wantin' to go up there. That's the end o' the road, an' if that red car went there an' come back—mister, I'm thinkin' I ain't gittin' any more o' Dirty Nell's white mule. It was hell's fire an' lightnin', but it was cheap."

Joe Lake knew the red car must have reached the main highway and have been well on its way either to Portland or back down the river toward Astoria a hundred miles away before they reached their own car.

Then Bumps was swearing lustily.

"The dirty heels! They took the distributor off the engine, Joe!"

Joe Lake clamped his teeth hard together, but grinned anyway.

"Seein' how many times the yeggs on the other sheets an' the cops have played that trick, I've taken to carrying a spare," he said, producing a distributor from under the seat cushion. It may not do this Dirty Nell any good, but we'll drive up there."

SIWASH'S gloomy prediction that he would be unable to buy any more white mule liquor from Dirty Nell was all too true. The mountain woman who had earned her name by keeping both chickens and pigs in her kitchen, and by distilling white corn whiskey openly in the same place, was lying in her doorway.

Joe Lake felt sick again. Bumps McCarthy

said, "If I had a plate, I'd pass up that shot. Joe, what say we call it a day? We won't get any place trailing that mad killer. I've never seen a woman's throat cut like that."

"Please, mister, wouldja lemme go now?" pleaded Siwash, his thin throat working to hold his stomach in line. "I think I'm wantin' to git clean away in the hills where they ain't nothin' worse than some wild cougars an' maybe a few snakes."

Joe Lake was not listening to Siwash. Now he could hear two or three cars grinding up the side road in second, undoubtedly drawn by the tower of smoke from the dying blaze of the truck.

"In a few minutes they will find that truck driver, but it's getting dark and I hope they won't just yet," said Joe. "I have part of an idea, Bumps. We're heading for the office where you load up with plates. I'm having a friend of mine give some mud a chemical test."

"I ain't wantin' to go into the city," whined Siwash, and he was still hanging onto his baggy pants that threatened to leave his thin legs at any time.

"You're going all the way, Siwash," said Joe. "If this is what I am beginning to think it is, you're not safe anywhere a killer who must kill can find you."

IT WAS nearly midnight. By his contact with the police radio, Joe Lake knew he had been given a lucky break. In the darkness of a mountain canyon, the county police who had not yet been able to dig into the white hot metal of a tank truck had missed finding the murdered truck driver.

But the county men had discovered the murdered Dirty Nell. The Portland morning sheet was already out with a story of this, the burning truck, and a snap theory of the county cops that the wrecked truck and the killing of the woman were a part of some bootleggers' feud.

The county police knew all about Dirty Nell's means of keeping herself alive, while she was, the small still in the rear of her pigsty and chicken roost kitchen.

That was all of the story, however. The police believed the driver of the truck had been burned to a cinder. They had not come upon the body of the original trucker or of Tully, who evidently, to Joe Lake, had killed and been killed over a yellow cat and a white one.

"The mention of the cats told me what to look for, Joe," said his chemist friend, "that mud shows faint traces of lacteal fluid. Just plain, everyday milk. And you say there have been four murders because that truck was stopped after being followed by the two cats?"

"That does it!" shouted Joe Lake. "Come on, Bumps! Siwash! We're on our way. If this is what I think it is, our first job is to find that red car. And I know where it will be."

"Nope, mister, nope," said Siwash emphatically. "I ain't never wantin' to see that red car again. Me? I'm takin' to the hills."

Siwash did not take to the hills. Once again he was squeezed between Joe Lake and Bumps, after having had his suspender strap repaired.

Neon lights of the long, low factory building streamed out across five acres of parking space. Joe Lake got out of the coupé and found the employee in charge.

"I'm looking for a red car," said Joe. "It might be parked here, or it could be in a garage if the factory has any."

The gray-haired attendant scratched his head.

"Now that's peculiar," he said after half a minute's hard thinking. "There ain't a single red car here that I've ever seen, chief. We have black cars and blue cars, yellow cars and green cars, and some that ain't much color left. But not a solitary red car. You might ask the super, Mr. Menlos. He's working extra tonight. Seems there has been a sudden change in a shipping order, and some of the day shift are loading trucks overtime to make a cargo steamer that's sailing early in the morning."

"Menlos? Where will he be? This may be—say! How long ago was the change made in an order for extra trucks of the powdered milk?"

Joe Lake had been hit by a thought so amazing, so terrible in its possibilities that his chest tightened.

"Why, Mr. Menlos come back to the

plant around eight o'clock, chief," said the parking attendant. "Him and Miss Shaner will be over in the outgoing freight office checking on the cases. I heard Mr. Menlos calling in six truck drivers to handle the loads. You see that *Ladona,* that's the ship, wasn't expected to sail until day after tomorrow."

JOE LAKE looked at the long row of lighted windows. The big dehydrating plant was engaged in reducing the tons of milk from Oregon cows to the package powder being shipped to starving hordes in the Orient.

"Sure about that red car, sir?" he questioned again, not satisfied. "By the way, does Mr. Menlos park his car out here?"

"Yes, right over there," pointed the attendant.

"By crickety! There she is!" exclaimed Siwash. "Me? Mister, I'm an old man. I just recollected that the salmon me an' Tully put in the smoke shacks today will be all spoiled if'n I don't git back to 'tend to bringin' in more wood."

Joe Lake ignored Siwash's final words.

He was staring at Siwash. "You just said, there she is, Siwash. You were looking at the car belonging to this Mr. Menlos?"

"Yup, sure," grunted Siwash. "That's her a'right, but I want to git back to them salmon 'fore they're spoiled."

"You mean that's the red car you saw, Siwash?"

"Yup, mister. An' this fellow is dead wrong. They's more than one red car as you can see—"

"What a dope I am!" ejaculated Joe Lake. "Siwash, anyone ever told you that you're color blind? Seein' red where it's green, and vice versa? How do you make out traffic signals?"

"Ain't never drove no car, mister. But I do see heaps of red cars on the road."

Two minutes later Joe Lake got up from the rear floor of the green sedan that Siwash had seen as red. The mystified attendant said, "This is irregular an' I'm liable to get fired. I'll have to call Mr. Menlos."

"I'll do the calling, partner!" snapped Joe Lake, exhibiting his reporter's badge. "We're not cops, but we're the next thing to it. Bumps, stick here, you and Siwash. This may be off the record but I think our friend would rather lose his job than find himself up to his ears in murder."

"Murder?" gulped the attendant. "How do you mean? What's them hairs you picked up?"

"No time to go into details," said Joe Lake. "But these are yellow and white cat hairs. Did either Mr. Menlos or Mr. Shaner have two cats when they parked their car?"

"Cats? Hell, no! I'd have seen them. Maybe Caulkins who nearly always drives for Mr. Menlos took the cats away."

"Menlos has a driver named Caulkins?" said Joe Lake.

"Yeah. But he doesn't drive Mr. Menlos all the time. He's one of the truck drivers. Maybe he's with the other fellows called out to make that night run into the Willamette river docks."

"That almost wraps it up!" exclaimed Joe Lake. "Only I'm afraid Caulkins won't be driving one of tonight's trucks, partner. You want to play along and keep your neck out of murder trouble? A lot of murder trouble?"

"Don't know what you mean, but I ain't looking for trouble," said the worried attendant. "Say, if them are cat hairs what became of the cats?"

"Same thing as happened to Caulkins, I guess," snapped Joe Lake, thinking of the burned truck and the driver with his skull blown apart. "Yes, it's likely the cats were cremated. Look, partner, you stick here and it may be worth your while. I'm wanting my cameraman—no—you go with him, you and Siwash here."

JOE LAKE could see one loaded truck pull out of the factory shed and wait while boxes of dehydrated milk powder were being packed into another truck behind it. As the parking attendant licked his dry lips and stared at him, he called Bumps to one side.

"Remember that narrow bridge we crossed coming up, Bumps?" said Joe Lake. "Look. Take my gun. I'll not need it. Make sure this parking lot guy sticks right with

you. And Siwash. Have at least three of your flash bulbs ready to set off in the middle of that bridge. When the first truck—"

He lowered his voice then and talked rapidly for another minute. He was cut off and he uttered an oath as the parking attendant seemed to have done some thinking and acted suddenly.

The attendant was sprinting toward the loading platforms and the lighted storage rooms behind them.

"Got me, Bumps?" rapped out Joe Lake. "Don't miss."

Bumps fumbled with the .38, his camera and other equipment. His round, red face was covered with a visible dew.

"An' if the truck don't stop when the driver sees the lights, Joe? What'll—"

"Shoot him before he shoots you!" grated Joe Lake and went sprinting after the parking man.

He caught up with the attendant just as he jumped for the office door at the top of a few steps.

"Menlos! Menlos!"

The attendant got out his one yell before Joe Lake's fist clunked under his ear and tumbled him inertly to the ground. Then Joe Lake pushed open the door.

JOE LAKE judged the angular, swarthy man seated at a corner desk was Mr. Menlos. It was a cool night, but Mr. Menlos was sweating what looked as greasy as olive oil. And his dark eyes were fixed upon the young and personable woman seated on another chair to one side of the desk.

Joe Lake saw instantly that Mr. Menlos was not as sure of himself as a ruthless killer should be.

There was a haggard look about the black eyes that flicked to the reporter, then back to the girl, as if Mr. Menlos felt he did not dare give her a break.

"Who're you? Whatcha want?"

His voice was strained. He had a sheet of paper before him on which it seemed he must have been checking the order that was being loaded.

"*Telegram* paper," grunted Joe Lake, halting just inside the door and looking through to the platform where boxes were being stowed into a ten-ton truck. "Editor wants a feature yarn on—"

Joe Lake had only a sideways look at the girl's face. She sat rigidly erect, as if she feared making any sudden move. Her eyes never left Mr. Menlos and her hands were clenched in her lap.

Thinking of what this young woman surely had witnessed in the past few hours, Joe Lake thought he could understand her attitude of frozen fear. He saw then, even as Mr. Menlos replied to his partly finished explanation, that Mr. Menlos was holding one hand just under the edge of his desk.

"We can't give out anything, except on special government order," said Mr. Menlos with slow deliberation. "If you haven't such an order, you'll have to get one."

Joe Lake's always observing glims told him he could now claim the prize for being forty kinds of a fool. The half-open door to the loading platform revealed half a dozen hard-faced truckmen who must have been on police records somewhere.

Joe Lake marveled at his own stupidity in sending Bumps McCarthy to set a trap for the trucks. If he had not had his mind upon saving what might be the biggest yarn of the year for tomorrow's first edition of the *Telegram*, he might have realized that a killer with a fast string of four bump-offs would not be taking any chances.

The girl was a handicap now. Within seconds Joe Lake saw that she was tense, her red mouth set in pitiful grimness. She gave him one panicky glance and her eyes appeared to be inflamed from weeping.

Even in this emergency, Joe Lake had time to notice that Miss Shaner was pretty. She had a mass of yellow hair coiled and braided on her small head.

And Joe Lake had been several kinds of fool to hand his gun over to Bumps. A killer who must kill was not to be handled by any trick the reporter could think up.

But he was in this now up to his eyebrows and he had to make the best of it.

"Why, sure, sir, I have a government order," he said, trying to be casual and moving toward the desk of Mr. Menlos. "It says the *Telegram* is entitled—"

He had his hand reaching into his side

coat pocket. If he could bluff for another ten seconds? He saw that the men loading the nearest truck were apparently not watching what transpired in the office.

Perhaps he could make a dive for Mr. Menlos. Possibly if she saw the play, Miss Shaner was not too terrorized to make a desperate effort to help him, to save herself.

He had one glimpse of her eyes upon him, closer now. They were big and yellow like her hair, but appeared red-rimmed even if all of her tears had been dried by her fear.

"Let me see that order—"

Mr. Menlos got out the words slowly. It came to Joe then that Mr. Menlos was a coward. That he was haunted by his own killings.

Joe Lake thought, here it is. He will have to come up fast with that hand under his desk.

"This is it!" rasped Joe Lake and jumped from his toes.

Mr. Menlos whipped up his hand. And if ever Joe Lake had seen stark fear in a man's eyes, it was there as Mr. Menlos seemed trying to get out of his chair.

EVEN as Joe Lake rammed his hard fists ahead of him he saw that Mr. Menlos had no gun in the hand that had been below the desk. And Mr. Menlos uttered a quivering shout.

"No—I won't! Look out—"

But Joe Lake's weight carried him over and they struck the floor together. To his amazement Mr. Menlos did not resist. He simply rolled his head, mouthing words.

"Had to do it—my wife—they'll kill—"

Joe Lake's fist smashed the words from the man's sputtering lips before he could understand. Then he heard the girl's low voice, and it seemed to hiss between her teeth.

"You fool—your wife's already dead—and you—"

The little crack of the silenced gun burned a flame along Joe Lake's ear. He rolled over, sickly conscious that Mr. Menlos had jerked and stiffened his body queerly.

"No, Petro, go back! I'll handle this!"

The girl's hissing voice again, and Joe Lake was trying to roll, adjust himself to this incredible circumstance. The silenced gun made a hot round circle in the back of his neck.

He moved only far enough to get one more glimpse of the yellow eyes of this Miss Shaner. And then he knew here was the killer who must kill.

For Mr. Menlos was lying on his back. His face seemed to mirror the grief that had come to him with perhaps his last living thought. The girl had said that his wife was already dead.

"Get on your feet!" The girl's words were cold and clipped now. "You will walk to your car. Petro! Close that second trunk. We'll roll the two we have loaded. This snooper will never talk."

Joe Lake felt numb and helpless. The girl was tall when she stood beside him. The silenced gun was brought down until it was pushing into his side. There Joe Lake could see it was hidden by the folds of Miss Shaner's dress.

"You can't get away with this, you know," said Joe Lake, but he did not believe his own words. "The police have—"

"You will please not to talk and go to your car," the calm, cold voice interrupted. "You think we have been that dumb. We have followed every move you have made, Joe Lake. Your cameraman and that other one are where they will never talk. Now walk quickly."

Joe Lake walked quickly. In his mind was the picture of four ruthlessly murdered victims. And of Mr. Menlos who had been held by some threat over his wife who, the girl had said, was dead.

He realized that the parking lot attendant must have been a part of this. The attendant had been merely playing them along. This icy woman killer even knew his name.

JOE LAKE got to his car. He took the wheel as the girl's gun pressed harder into his ribs. He would have been a fool to do otherwise.

Joe Lake could only swear inwardly at having told only his chemist friend some of what had happened. To be sure, afterward the chemist would talk, but then it would be too late.

Yes. By that time it might be impossible to tie up what he now knew about the big dehydrating plant and the murders committed on the Columbia River highway. Even if that could be done, a ship would have sailed, carrying another form of murder.

"Drive out slowly, Joe Lake," the girl said into his ear. "You think you have uncovered something, but you have nothing. The trucks now coming out are not going to a ship. But none but our own people will know that, or where the trucks will be unloaded."

Joe Lake understood now how the parking attendant had either been tricking them or had himself been misinformed of the truth. It was too late now to do anything about that.

He started the newspaper coupé, but was compelled to turn it slowly and wait.

"Any move you make finishes it," the girl said directly. "If those damn' cats had not followed a leak in that milk truck there need not have been any killing. I don't like to kill, but it has to be that way now."

Joe Lake had met up with murder in many forms. This was the coldest, the most ruthless, and worse, the most fanatical he had ever encountered. His life, that of Mr. Menlos, the lives of all others were less than human pawns to the kind of brain housed under this woman's braided coils of yellow hair.

"You see, Joe Lake, we knew there were no police, and we also knew about your visit to a chemist friend who will never talk either," the girl said. "There are many of us you would not suspect. This is too big for little people like you."

"That just about ties it all up, you think?" said Joe Lake grimly, but knowing his voice was thick. "You'll not finish it. When they find Menlos—"

Two trucks were beginning to move slowly out toward the paved road where it dipped down the grade toward the main highway nearly three miles below. The inhuman killer beside Joe Lake chilled him with her low laugh.

"No one will find Mr. Menlos, or his wife, she said. "There will be no reason for an alarm. At least not in time to prevent our shipment being scattered among thousands of cases, hundreds of tons of other powdered milk. You see?"

Joe Lake, cold sweat running into his eyes, did see. His hands were slippery on the coupé's wheel. The big ten-ton trucks were coming toward them.

"Drive ahead of the first truck," directed the woman. "If you think there is any other way, it will be as easy to dispose of your body and the car now as later."

Joe Lake could not hope that Bumps McCarthy would be on the bridge where he had told him to go. He wondered if Bumps and Siwash were still alive. Bumps was resourceful. That was more than he had been.

He could see three men crowding into the front seat of the first big truck that was beginning to gather speed. He judged the conspirators were all getting out on these two trucks.

That meant there were others who had seized Bumps and Siwash. Probably the body of Mr. Menlos was now in that second truck. For as he looked, the lights of the shipping office had been turned off.

The working rooms of the other sections of the big plant continued to send out the sounds of a busy night shift, preparing the huge supply of milk for shipment overseas.

"Drive in ahead of that truck," the girl ordered. "And hold your speed down. Don't get any idea of being noble and of wrecking the car either. You'll be dead before—"

On the downgrade the first oncoming truck was picking up momentum. Joe Lake had no hope that he might live. Not with this woman killer who must keep on killing.

So this was death, as he had sometimes feared it might come to him. He had to take it. That being an unalterable fact, Joe Lake could see no other way but to jam his foot down on the gas, twist the wheel and jump the coupé ahead into the road leading out.

"Why, you—I told you—"

HE HEARD only the woman's startled words as her silenced gun blazed into his ribs. The quick twist he had been able to give his spine had not been enough. The

(*Continued on page* 91)

Dr. Gabriel resents the popular idea that psychiatrists are something like mediums, but when he is asked to investigate a ghost who strangles people, he accepts the assignment

I HAD heard Doctor Gabriel in his office next to mine, on Lexington Avenue, talking to a woman, and I saw her as she went out—a little old lady in black, with a kindly, troubled face. Gabriel called me in, and his own face was thunderous.

"Ghost business!" he snorted. "That's Miss Bram—Margaret Bram, who's come down from a place called Little Harlech to persuade me to dissuade a ghost that has been strangling people. You know I don't handle ghost business. The populace seems to think a psychiatrist is a medium. But," he added, "I've promised to handle this. I looked up Miss Bram's history while she was waiting. You remember the Bram case?"

I had only a faint remembrance of the name. Gabriel snorted again and said:

Terror by Night

By LEW MERRILL

"Margaret Bram's sister, Ellen, was found strangled to death on their property at that place with the absurd name, about two years ago. A year later their half-brother, Nathan Sale, was found dead in the grounds in the same way. A fool of a doctor gave apoplexy as the cause of death in both cases, so they didn't create the furor that they might have done."

"And?"

"Last month, Eli Thompson, the sheriff's assistant, who seems to have been prowling around the grounds, looking for the ghost strangler, died in the same way. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"Only on Sunday," I said. That wasn't fair of Gabriel. He knew that every moment of my time was devoted to our study of opsonic reactions in the blood cells.

"Well, the public's awake at last to what it calls the 'ghost mystery,' and Miss Margaret Bram has come here from that place with the preposterous name, to ask me, the famous psychiatrist, to dissuade the ghost. It's a wonder she didn't ask me to materialize it, with a rose in one hand and a lily in the other—'apports,' I believe they call them, in their jargon."

Illustrated by William Meilink

Gabriel fired but once, and the head of the snake was shattered.

WHEN the little doctor had cooled down, I elicited the details of the affair. The Bram family had been prominent in the

South before the Civil War ruined them. They owned the remnants of a plantation in southern Virginia, and there the two old ladies and the half-brother had been living for almost a life-span.

"There's a fortune in the Chancery court," said Gabriel. "Been there for years. Lately the fraudulent claims of suppositious heirs have been eliminated, and there's a real prospect of a settlement. Miss Margaret Bram is due to receive a much more substantial share, since her sister and half-brother are dead."

The case was certainly beginning to assume a very definite significance. "Is the old lady cracked?" I asked.

"Oh, quite definitely so. The hopeless kind that's generally harmless until some *idée fixe* takes possession of the mind. The fact that Miss Bram came to me, the eminent psychiatrist, to eliminate a ghost for her, establishes that fact as a certainty."

"What is the old lady's theory of a ghost that strangles people?"

"That it's her great-grandfather, a man of prodigious strength and passionate nature, who is supposed to have killed two British officers in the Revolutionary War by choking them to death. He's buried in a vault outside the house. He was a wealthy man, and his money, which went into chancery, has increased to a considerable sum, despite the legal costs. The supposition is that he prowls the grounds at night, infuriated by the loss of the money, and seeking vengeance."

"She certainly does seem cracked," I said. "I'm surprised you're going to take the case."

"I'd be a little surprised myself," answered Gabriel, "except that I looked up the family history in the *Encyclopedia of American Biography,* and there's a singular streak of insanity in the family. The grandfather, a notorious duellist, was cashiered for killing a naval officer during the operations against Tripoli. He subsequently married a Turkish girl, and brought her to America. However, he married again, quite sensibly, in America, after her death, so there's only pure Anglo-Saxon blood in Miss Bram.

"The father, Alfred Bram, was American consul at Cape Town, Accra, and Mozambique for many years. He explored the Gaboon, and brought back one of the first gorillas ever introduced to this country, besides other species of mammals, birds, and reptiles, some of which got him into hot water with the authorities. Yes, I shall certainly be interested in this case," said Doctor Gabriel.

"Have you any grounds as yet on which to form any theory?" I asked him.

He gave me one of those chilly, disconcerting looks of his, which reduced me to silence.

OF COURSE I knew the doctor had some kind of theory, and yet the story seemed too preposterous for a man of his intelligence to investigate.

He was quite glum during the long train journey down to Virginia. Then there came a wait of four hours, the transfer to a small branch line, and finally, quite worn out, we reached Little Harlech, late in the afternoon.

It proved to be a tiny country village, set in the midst of dense woods, with Negro shacks, half a dozen frame houses, and a country store. A man in top-boots, husky, bearded, about fifty years of age, was the sole occupant of the platform.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he greeted us. "I'm Sheriff Gideon Moses. Miss Margaret told me you were expected. But I dunno what your next move will be. You see, Miss Margaret was attacked by the strangler last night."

Gabriel looked startled, and it was unusual for him to betray any kind of emotion or surprise. "Killed?" he asked.

"No, it's the first time the strangler hasn't completed his job. Probably frightened away. The black maid, Whydah, found her lying under a tree near the house. She'd said she was going out to pick some dogwood. That's curious, because she was lying at least a hundred yards from the house, and the other three were all killed in the vault."

"Including your deputy Thompson?"

"Yep, poor feller. He was sure there was a secret passage in the vault where the strangler hid out, while it was all as plain as the nose on your face."

"Who did it?"

"Why, that ox of a feller, Jenkins. He's a halfwit, and he's been with the Bram sisters for years. Devoted to them, jealous of everyone else around."

"If he was devoted to both sisters, why in the world would he have strangled Miss Ellen?"

"If I could figure out that one," answered Moses, "I'd have had him in the chair six months ago. He's the feller, and he killed poor Thompson for snooping around. There is considerable feeling in the district, and there's been some talk of a lynching."

"You don't believe, then, that it's the spirit of old Zachary Bram who's done these murders?"

"I ain't that kind of a fool. But I'll admit there's many who do think so. No, sir, these were cold-blooded murders, and the object—to git all that chancery money for Miss Margaret."

"But you think she's innocent?"

"Bless the old lady's heart, she's as innocent as a babe unborn."

"Now, about this Doctor Lowden," said Doctor Gabriel.

"Why, we all think the world of Doctor Lowden. He's a cousin of Miss Margaret's. Born and bred here, and always lived here, except when he was away studying, and in France during the war. That's his house, across the way, end of the street. He'll tell you what he thinks about it."

"He said the other deaths were due to apoplexy?" inquired Gabriel.

"Well, even a doctor's liable to error," admitted the sheriff reluctantly. "Besides, they sure did look as if they'd had thundering strokes. But I reckon Doctor Lowden has changed his mind after seeing Miss Margaret. You go and see him, folks, and then I'll be glad to do whatever I can for you."

"I understood that we were to go straight to Miss Bram's house. I suppose the servants are expecting us?"

"Well, now, there's old Whydah—she's a nice black body, but she's more or less past service. And there's Jenkins. If Miss Margaret told Jenkins you was to come, Jenkins will do his best. But, if she didn't tell him—say, I'd best go along with you. Two fellers like you wouldn't be a match for Jenkins."

Gabriel laughed, and I was amused too. Of course Sheriff Moses couldn't dream that the little doctor had once been a cavalry officer, in his native land—where it was, I had never been quite sure, and was fully competent to defend himself against a brutal item like this Jenkins.

"I carry a gun," he said. "And I know how to use it so as to inflict the maximum of discomfort and the minimum of damage. The right brachial nerve, for instance—it's easy to hit it if you're anything of a marksman."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders. "You gentlemen call on me when you need me," he said. "Well, I'll see you later."

DOCTOR LOWDEN was a tall, handsome, soldierly man in his middle forties. He looked like the army officer he had been.

"I'm glad to welcome you, gentlemen," he said. "It's a pleasure to receive such distinguished investigators of my own profession, instead of the half-baked detectives they usually send on such cases."

"I see you know us," commented Gabriel.

"Oh, well, news gets around, especially in a place like Little Harlech. I believe the Negroes know you were expected, and are probably terrified out of their wits of you, Doctor Gabriel. Now how can I be of service to you?"

"What is Miss Bram's condition?"

"Improving. She will recover, and I am sure will be delighted to see you gentlemen."

"She is the first person who has recovered after being attacked by this strangler?"

Lowden appeared embarrassed. He anticipated Doctor Gabriel's next question. "In every case the signs pointed to apoplexy," he explained. "Certainly it was a coincidence that both Miss Margaret Bram and Mr. Sale should have been struck down at almost precisely the same spot, but the suffusion of blood left me no other reasonable diagnosis."

"Did you change your opinion after Thompson suffered the same fate?"

"I couldn't make up my mind. Of course I'd heard the story of a strangling ghost, but naturally I paid no attention to it."

"You believe now that some maniacal murderer is at large?" asked Gabriel.

"I'm afraid there can be no doubt of it."

"Has your suspicion fallen upon any person?"

"Now there," said Lowden, smiling, "I am afraid I must decline to answer you. As a medical officer, with police powers, I should be placing myself—and the other person—in an extremely difficult position."

"Quite so," said Doctor Gabriel. "We are expected up at the house, and propose to go there immediately. Is there any objection to our seeing Miss Bram?"

"I'll drive you there," said Lowden. "It's all of four miles. Then I'll let you know what Miss Bram's condition is."

THOSE four miles were through as wild and strange a vegetation as I have ever seen. It had once been cotton land, Lowden told us, the best variety, growing almost along the northern limit of cultivation. But it had long since gone back to forest, and some of those trees were strange to me. I said as much.

"Miss Bram's father introduced a number of exotic species from Africa," answered Lowden. Most of them died, of course, but we think a number of these are of the species he brought here. They have never been botanically investigated. We are not far from the Dismal Swamp."

The country grew even wilder, and low tracts of marshy land indicated that the great Swamp must be close at hand. Then came a ridge of rising ground, and on it we saw the Bram mansion.

It was exactly as I could have anticipated. There was a portico, with the pillars traditionally associated with Southern mansions, and the long building had graceful outlines, but it was weatherbeaten and dilapidated. About it stretched a small terrain into which the forest trees were advancing in encroaching lines, like an invading army. A few relics of Negro huts were visible in the brush, and close beside the house was a curious mound, with a base of brickwork, evidently the vault that contained the remains of the original Bram.

We drove up a weed-grown driveway, and stopped in front of the portico. The front was even more dilapidated than it had appeared to be. There were great rents in the wooden columns, and the whole portico seemed in danger of collapsing.

I fancied there was some amusement on Dr. Lowden's face as he stepped out, inviting us to follow him. But at that moment Jenkins appeared out of the entrance—and it could not have been anyone but Jenkins.

A huge squat fellow, not more than five feet two, but with bigger limbs than I could imagine on any human being. A low-browed creature, not bestial or repulsive, but distinctly of moronic intelligence. He came shambling down the steps of the portico with incredible celerity, and grinned all over his face as he opened the door of the car for us.

"You are welcome, gentlemen," he said in a shrill voice. "Miss Margaret has ordered that you shall have the very best attention." And from the glibness of that falsetto it was evident that the speech had been learned by rote.

WHYDAH, the black woman, who received us on the threshold, seemed of incredible age. She looked more like a cross between a mummy and a monkey than a human being. But the grin on her face was even more expansive than that on Jenkins's.

"You shore is welcome, gennelmens," she beamed, courtesying until she seemed no more than three feet high. "I shall show you to your rooms, gennelmens, and dinner will be ready in half an hour, and Miss Margaret will be down."

"I'm glad she's better," said Gabriel, looking curiously, and, as it seemed to, with a sort of satisfaction at some deep incisions all around the wrinkled throat. They had evidently been made for decorative purposes, and must once have formed a circle, but the folds of the wrinkled skin had destroyed the pattern.

Our rooms connected, and were at the rear of the old mansion. They were prettily furnished, and had a connecting bathroom,

"Ghosts don't stop for gates," I said, speaking my thoughts aloud.

"Gates don't always stop living ghosts," said Gabriel. "But ghost is hardly the word.

Gabriel's shot rang out just as my flash centered on that snarling face.

though from the appearance of the wall of the corridor I suspected that most of the Bram house had been allowed to lapse into decay.

Outside, the sun was an immense ball of fire on the horizon. Around the corner of the building I could see the vault. It stood very close, a great mound of earth upon brickwork, two or three steps leading down, and presumably there was a gate at the bottom.

Come, let's get washed up. I guess you're more or less tired, as I am, but I'm certainly glad I came."

"Lowden wasn't too ceremonious," I said. "I didn't even see if he came in."

"He came in, and he's inside now. I think he was polite enough. After all, this business touches him, both in his professional life and as a member of the family."

"Cousin, isn't he?" I asked. "I suppose he'll come in for a sizable portion of that fortune, if ever it gets out of Chancery."

"If the ghost don't get him," answered Gabriel dryly.

"Oh, the ghost won't get *him,*" I returned. I looked at Doctor Gabriel to see whether my shaft had hit, but his face was expressionless. And we had barely finished washing when a gong sounded below, golden, mellifluous, and we went down.

THE little old lady who received us was leaning on the arm of Doctor Lowden. Her face was still discolored, but she was smiling brightly.

"It was so kind of you gentlemen to come down," she said, "and I made a special effort to meet you, despite the terrible experience I have been through. I understand that Cyril Lowden told you about it."

"The sheriff too, ma'am," said Gabriel.

"Yes, I suppose it is generally known. Well, we'll talk after dinner. Doctor Gabriel, will you conduct me?"

Gabriel gave her his arm. The man, Jenkins, threw back the folding-doors. The dining room was somber in its heavy mahogany, but the napery and silver were spotless, and the dinner, served by Jenkins, was as excellent as the wine. The conversation was about anything except the issue at hand.

The soft light of the candles shone on the faces of the diners—on Lowden's, quiet and dignified, on Gabriel's, with his inscrutable expression, on Miss Margaret's; and on the apelike face of Jenkins, who slouched to and fro, handing the dishes. It was not until we had returned to the salon, with its solid, ghostlike furniture, a few bright cretonnes, and oil-lamps illuminating the Victorian knickknacks on the whatnot and the piano, that the subject was broached.

"I understand," said Lowden, "that my cousin's purpose is to hold what she calls a 'séance,' tonight, with Whydah as the communicator between this world and the next. I regret that my professional duties force me to return." He rose, bowing to Doctor Gabriel and me.

"You know, that sort of thing is out of my line," Lowden continued, with an unpleasant smile. "I am only a humble country doctor, but still an orthodox one."

He might just as well have slapped Gabriel across the cheek. Instinctively he had wounded him in his weakest spot. But the little Doctor Gabriel didn't even show his hurt by the flicker of an eyelash.

"I had already come to that opinion from your diagnostic skill, my dear colleague," he answered.

Lowden glared, bowed again, and went stiffly from the house. Margaret Bram said brightly: "Do sit down, gentlemen. I can talk freely to you, Doctor Gabriel, you being one of our leading spiritualists, and understanding psychic phenomena."

It seemed to me that two such blows within five minutes of each other were more than Doctor Gabriel could stand. But Gabriel only bowed his acknowledgments. "I could hardly claim that honor, ma'am," he answered, "but I have studied these matters in a humble way."

"My maid Whydah, whose parents and grandparents lived with my family, is one of the most powerful mediums in the world. She has promised to sit for us tonight. Several times we have got into touch with the spirit of my great-grandfather, but he was always too much overcome by emotion to understand us, or to make himself understood. Will you, Doctor, tell him that nobody is stealing his treasure; that it is safely locked up in the bank?"

"I'll do my best, ma'am," said the doctor.

THOUGH Gabriel always refused to commit himself to any theory, we had seen too many inexplicable things together for me to doubt entirely: that there might be a fifth form of matter beyond the radiant was as far as the doctor had ever committed himself. But here was such a plain case of

fraud, and my own mind was practically so made up as to the identity of the slayer, that I took little interest when the wizened black woman seated herself on a chair in a "cabinet" formed by a curtain drawn across an angle of the wall, and promptly fell into a "trance."

To my mind, those mumblings and mutterings were the essence of fake. But suddenly I was startled when a deep, rich, masculine voice, with just the least touch of an eighteenth-century brogue, came out of the "cabinet" from behind the curtain.

It was a man's voice, deep and clear, and it seemed animated by uncontrollable passion. "You rogues of redcoats, I'm going to break your necks for you!" it roared. There followed frightful invective, followed by old Whydah's scream, and the chair came pitching out of the cabinet, throwing her onto the floor, where she lay squealing.

Such is the force of imagination that, while she lay there I seemed to hear that terrible voice continuing, but very softly now, behind the curtains!

The doctor ran forward, picked up the old crone, put her on her chair, and set her down inside the curtains again. It seemed to me curious afterward that Margaret Bram had sat perfectly still through all this rumpus, without uttering a sound.

The doctor said: "If you want to come here, you've got to behave yourself, my man."

"And whom would you presume to call 'my man'?"—from behind the curtains.

"What are you here for?"

"I live here. I've just killed two redcoats, and the English have stolen my fortune."

"Where do you think you are?"

"In Little Harlech, named after my Welsh ancestors."

"You don't know that you're dead?" queried Gabriel blandly.

"Like hell I am!" came the reply.

Gabriel said quietly: "You have been dead many years, my friend, and you're creating a good deal of disturbance. We'll be willing to listen to anything you have to say, but you've got to behave yourself."

"I've killed men for saying less than that!" roared the frantic voice from behind the curtains.

"You've committed many crimes, no doubt, for which you are condemned to wander in darkness and ignorance," said Gabriel implacably.

"And that's what I keep trying to tell grandfather, only he won't listen," another voice broke in. "And he makes such a disturbance that I can't get a word in edgewise. Why won't the Government give me another appointment to a consulate? Blaine used to be my friend. He'd help me, if I could get to him, but they're keeping me away from him. And what have they done with my beautiful zoological collection, my gorilla, and my—"

"Stop him! Shut him up, the fool!" That cry came from Margaret Bram. With surprising agility she leaped from her chair and lunged against the curtain. With an answering scream, the old black woman tumbled forward again, and the two women lay sprawled on the floor.

The voice within the cabinet had been cut off abruptly, but I could feel a wind blowing through the curtains. Gabriel called to me: "Turn up the lamp!"

I hurried to obey. Old Whydah was on her feet now, whimpering, but Margaret Bram lay motionless in the doctor's arms.

"I'm going to carry her up to bed and tend to her," said Gabriel. "You, woman, lead the way up to her room." Declining my offer of help, he raised the unconscious woman and carried her up the stairs as easily as if she had been a baby. I followed them up into my room, sat down, and waited. The moon was rising, but the night was cloudy and dark; I knew it had all been fake, but a feeling of terror gripped me as I waited there.

After what seemed an endless time, Gabriel came in. His face was grim. He dropped into a chair and lit a cigarette, something I knew him to do only in moments out of excitement.

"Well, the cat's out of the bag," he said, after a while.

"It was all fake, wasn't it?" I asked him. "It was fake," he corrected me, and went on puffing his cigarette.

GABRIEL always talked when he was ready to, and now he began: "Curious thing, that woman sitting like a stone while her alleged great-grandfather was speaking, but cutting in when her alleged father came on the scene. It doesn't matter whether they were actually the entities they represented themselves to be, or secondary personalities of the old black woman. The point is, Margaret Bram didn't want us to hear what the alleged father was saying."

"About his menagerie!" I exclaimed. "About the gorilla—"

"Don't leap at conclusions. You didn't happen to notice that the trees were cut down for about thirty feet on either side of the driveway, did you, where usually they are allowed to grow up close, and even overarch?"

"I remember it now," I said. "But what deduction do you draw from that? Gorillas are not arboreal, in a real sense, you know." I added triumphantly.

Gabriel's face was inscrutable. "We're going to explore that vault—if you're not afraid of the strangler," he said.

"I'd rather not meet him, of course," I answered, "but I'm ready to accompany you."

"It's perfectly safe at this season of the year," said Gabriel. "Remember, Miss Margaret was struck down a hundred feet from the house, while gathering dogwood, and the three others were apparently killed in the vault, though they appear to have struggled out of the entrance."

He clapped his hand on my shoulder. "Don't take my ways amiss," he said. "We have worked too long together. There may yet turn up something that will present this whole business in a new light, though I don't think so."

"You've formed an opinion then?" I inquired.

"Pretty much so." Gabriel drew a tiny but powerful flashlight out of his suitcase. "You take this," he said. "I'll carry the gun. Keep just a foot or two ahead of me. I'll see no harm comes to you. You remember my silver cup for pistol-shooting, in my rooms on Lexington Avenue?"

I nodded. The tension was relaxed. We went down the stairs and out of the house. Doctor Gabriel made no effort to conceal the sound of his footsteps. We met no one, and in a moment or two we were outside the house, and at the entrance of the burial vault.

OVERHEAD was the great mound of rammed earth, at the base of the brickwork. We went down four steps, and by the light of my flash I saw that a powerful and very closely knit mesh grille was open. I had never seen a grille so tightly woven before, but there was no time to speculate about this, and I led the way through into a low vault, just high enough to make it unnecessary for us to stoop. A dozen feet, and the light of my torch fell upon another grille exactly like the one by which we had entered. This, too, was open.

I peered through. The vault seemed to end here, and all I could see was a low earthern tunnel. I could smell fresh earth, as if it had been excavated recently.

And the purpose of the vault was unintelligible to me. I was standing just in front of the doctor when a shadow darkened the opening beyond the second grille, and something came leaping out with a snarl of fury. The crack of the doctor's pistol rang out before I recognized our assailant.

It was Jenkins, now reeling back, the snarl changing to a bubbling scream. The man dropped in a huddled heap. The doctor snatched the torch out of my hand, and squatted over him. I could see what had happened before Gabriel turned to me and said: "He's dead!"

"Damn it, that's what comes of boasting of my marksmanship!" Gabriel exploded. "Nothing the matter with my aim. I'd have got him through the right brachial nerve, and stopped him cold, if he hadn't tried to butt you with his head."

The wound, black stained with red, was exactly in the center of the dead man's forehead.

"So we lose one of our chief criminals," I said.

"No, I don't think he had anything to do except obey orders which his brain was too sluggish for him to understand. We'll leave

him here. Tonight the little play draws to a close."

OUTSIDE, he said, speaking in the shadow of the wall, "I'm going to walk into the village and get Sheriff Moses and Doctor Lowden. I want you to take the pistol and stay in your room, with the oil lamp turned high. Sit in a chair against the wall and watch the window. You may be in serious danger."

"Suppose I walk into the village—that is, if you'll enlighten me as to the nature of your errand," I suggested.

"No, I'll go," answered Gabriel.

"Then don't you think you'll need the pistol?"

"Not half so much as you're likely to, my friend. I don't want to be more explicit now. Just stay in your chair, in your room, till I get back. All right—take the gun now, and be careful going up the stairs. I'll be on my way at once."

I took the weapon from his hands, and, without ceremony, the little doctor turned his back on me and marched off around the house. I saw him going down the drive, keeping well in the middle of it, and then he passed out of sight.

The thought of the dead grotesque of a man, lying in the vault, did not diminish my feeling of nerves. And the pistol shot, which must have been heard in the house, had aroused not the least response.

Yet there were two insane women within those walls. And I passed cautiously through the dimly lighted hall, and felt my heart hammering as I ascended the stairs. But still not a sound, and now I had regained my room. I closed the door softly, and looked searchingly around me. There was nobody in the room, nor in the empty closet, the door of which stood wide open.

What had my instructions been? To turn the oil lamp high; to back my chair against the wall, and watch the open window. Gabriel never gave precise instructions unless they had significance. I obeyed. But what was it all about?

Frankly, I had thought Jenkins the strangler, but the doctor had absolved him. I no longer believed in the gorilla theory. I couldn't make head or tail of the fake séance, or of Gabriel's hints about it, when I recalled it. And so I just sat awaiting the doctor's returning with the sheriff and Lowden. Only, why was he coming back with the sheriff and Lowden? What did it all portend?

I DON'T know how long a time passed. I was growing sleepy, half-hypnotized with watching that window for some unimaginable danger, when suddenly I was startled by the sound of a shot somewhere in the grounds, followed by a woman's scream, and then by a succession of screams.

I was on my feet in an instant—and then I remembered Gabriel's warning. But the screams went on and on, and as I stood irresolute I heard footsteps running up the stairs. There followed a pounding at my door, and the screams of old Whydah outside:

"Gennelman, gennelman, come quick! The doctor have got shot, he's dying!"

All thought that this might be a trick vanished at these words. I flung the door open, and saw the old crone crouching down outside. She pointed down the stairs, and I ran down, while she followed me with surprising swiftness. Out into the moonlight, that now flooded the drive, and the trees on either hand. Some distance down the drive I saw the figure of another woman standing. It was that of Margaret Bram.

As I came nearer, I saw that she was still dressed in her black attire, but she was wearing a long green neckpiece, one end of which she was holding in her hand. I ran up to her.

"Where's Doctor Gabriel?" I shouted.

She had been stooping slightly, but now she rose. She was a fairly tall woman—I hadn't realized that before. She was playing with the green neckpiece, shielding its end in her hand. Slowly she uncoiled it, and the repeated question died on my lips as I saw the head of a vicious snake darting toward me from the top of the sinuous body.

There was no time to escape. The snake uncoiled with frightful speed, till it seemed to stand straight out from the woman's shoulder. I felt the red-hot sting of the fangs in my arm below the elbow. And I

heard the cackling madness of Margaret Bram's voice: "That's right, father. That's good work, my dear. I'll have your mate ready when that interloping doctor comes!"

IT WAS horror rather than weakness that paralyzed me at first. Then I started toward the woman again. But she was gone, streaking into the bush on one side of the road. The pain of the bite was running up and down my arm. And old Whydah was crouching near me, doubled up like a gigantic monkey, and beginning to circle me, uttering some gibberish in her cracked voice.

That pain was growing murderous. My arm was red-hot, and yet helpless. My senses swam. I collapsed upon the ground. The figure of the old Negress had become two women, and they were circling me, posturing, waving their arms, and chanting. But it was two women. I hadn't begun seeing double yet. The second woman was Margaret Bram, wearing another green snake as a girdle, and she was no longer the gentle old lady I had known, but looked like a devil out of hell.

They had linked arms, and the green snake formed another link between them, darting its ugly head at me as the two circled in that weird dance.

But a car was coming up the drive. The women broke apart, and stood irresolute. Margaret Bram, waving the green snake and crouching, turned toward the three men who came running forward. I heard the crack of a shot, and saw the head of the snake shatter to pieces, and the body stiffen about Margaret's neck.

And then Gabriel was at my side. "I didn't miss *that* shot!" he shouted exultantly, and I felt the sting of a needle in my arm that was still sound, and the slash of a knife.

"Anti-venine," he said. "I brought it with me on the chance. It was a long-shot guess, but it worked. You see, Margaret Bram's father was a herptetologist, among other things, and brought back a quantity of poisonous snakes from Africa, among them the deadly mamba. Never mind that—you'll be all right soon. We'll get you into the house to bed."

"I thought it was Lowden who was the murderer," I whispered weakly, for by now the poison was taking effect throughout my system.

And even in that moment Gabriel couldn't help replying: "Never look for the less probable solution when there's a simpler one at hand. At least, that would be my way, if I were interested in the deductive method."

WEAK as I was, I could see Lowden and Sheriff Moses circling the two women, warily, anxious to be sure that there were no more snakes about them. Little Doctor Gabriel left me on the ground for a moment. Dizzy and weak as I was, I could see and hear.

"Miss Margaret, I've got to arrest you for the wilful murder of your sister, Miss Ellen, and your half-brother, Mr. Sale, and my deputy, Eli Thompson," called the sheriff. "And that goes with you, too, Whydah. I'm taking you back."

Old Whydah had another snake after all. She had extracted it from her clothes, and it was bigger than either of the two others. It was rearing its ugly head, not at her, but at Margaret.

Margaret Bram ran forward and clasped it to her breast, and that act seemed to me perhaps the most horrible part of all I'd seen. Moses and Lowden had recoiled. And then I understood why Gabriel had left my side. He was walking toward the woman, and she was crouched like a cat, directing the snake's head at him. He walked steadily forward until it seemed he was in danger of imminent death—and then his hand came from behind his back, and the gun cracked again. Then there were no more snakes....

Doctor Lowden came over and looked at me. "That anti-venine seems to be working," I heard him say to Gabriel, with a note of new respect in his voice. "Where did you get it?"

"It's Calmette's. Oh, a place in New York." For the moment I, the patient, was forgotten in the medical dissertation that ensued. "It's a mixture of cobra and viper types. The African mamba is classed among the colubrids, but it's actually one of the micruridae. I don't think Calmette's mixed serum has been tried out in a case of mamba poisoning before. I took a chance on the

mamba, and the dose seems to be working—"

I WAS better next day; I was much better the day after, and able to listen to the little doctor's exposition. "You had a narrow squeak," he said. "If I hadn't come along just in time—the mamba is one of the deadliest snakes known, except perhaps the krait and the coral. I'd taken the precaution to bring some anti-venine with me, but I couldn't be sure it would work for your kind of poisoning."

"What made you suspect snake-poisoning?" I asked.

"Because the hemolytic toxin closely stimulates strangling in the victim's appearance. It would be the mamba, because that's an African snake, and Margaret Bram's father had been a consul at various African ports for years. By the way, the woman kept screaming out that the mambas were her father."

"Why?"

"That's an African superstitution, you know, the transmigration of humans into snakes. Now add the snake-worship of Obeah, the appearance of what had been the serpent-tattoo around the neck of the old woman, and you begin to get the picture, as I saw it."

"But the vault?" I asked. "And Jenkins?"

"Jenkins's mission was to keep the snakes hibernating in the vault during the winter months. The mamba differs from most of the snakes in being a tree-dweller. In summer they migrated through the tunnel beyond the second grille, and took up their abode in that dense bush that Margaret Bram's father planted, no doubt to shield his pets. With the bush cut away on either side of the driveway, there was no danger of a mamba dropping on the head of anyone using it."

"And?"

"So you see why Margaret Bram was struck in the woods, when she went to gather dogwood, while the others were struck close by the house in winter time, by mambas goaded to attack them."

"But why was she struck?"

"It's my belief," said Gabriel, "that she deliberately allowed herself to be bitten, to remove suspicion from herself, and for the same reason she came to me about the ghost. Doubtless old Whydah possessed some sort of native remedy for snakebite. Whydah herself, of course, is totally immune."

"So?"

"When I carried the old lady upstairs, I made it my business to discover the fang punctures on her shoulder. She knew I understood, and I knew she would strike that night. Hence my maneuvers, which perhaps I should have explained to you. I went into the vault with you to make sure the snakes had gone. Jenkins had been sent there for the same purpose. Tomorrow I think we'll be able to go back to New York, and I've promised Sheriff Moses we'll appear as witnesses. However, there will be no trial. The women will be committed to an asylum."

I SAID: "It's queer she used that roundabout method of spirit possession. When Lowden was so offensive, I quite believed he was the moving force behind it all."

"Maybe I did too, for a little," Gabriel confessed. "But when a man's insulted, his judgment is apt to cloud a little. By the way, I've been talking to Miss Margaret in the county jail. She railed at me as the spirit of evil, under some African name. She's completely sold on Obeah and snake-worship, you know. She accused me of having killed her father."

"And?"

"So far as the séance went, the trance was genuine enough, but, as I said, I'm not prepared to commit myself as to whether those voices came from the dead or were secondary personalities of old Whydah. Until we know more about this sort of thing, we'll say they were secondary personalities. But it was genuine enough."

"What?"

"You see, as soon as the second voice came through, that of Margaret's father, she broke up the whole thing. She was afraid it would speak about the snakes, and give the game away. Oh, that part was not all fake. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than your philosophy dreams of!'"

DEATH SHAKES THE DICE

Illustrated by
Jay McArdle

One time McKelvey had loved the girl, or so he thought. But could he ever have loved this girl who now was trying to frame him for the murder of her husband?

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

His matinee-idol face was deceptive. He parried McKelvey's punch, and countered with a left jab, followed by a right cross.

"YOU mess around with me, brother, and I'll pin back your rosy little ears," the big man said. There was no heat in his voice, no malice, no anger. He was simply stating a fact.

McKelvey surveyed this calm, hulking man who stood guard at the wrought-iron gates. Smaller by eight inches and eighty pounds, McKelvey knew he wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with the big guy. Despite this, he also knew he had to get past those gates.

"You don't recognize the press, hunh?"

The big man smiled toothily. "Sure. I

recognize the press soon as I see it. I can smell a reporter a mile away."

"I'm not a reporter, I'm a photographer. *Daily Blade.*"

"Yeah. And I got orders not to let any newspaper men onto the grounds. Shove off, little fella."

Shove off was a nautical term. "Navy?" McKelvey looked at the guy's discharge button.

"Yeah."

McKelvey indicated his own ruptured duck. "Me, too. I did four years in the pig boats."

"Battlewagons, here." A touch of respect came into the brawny guy's manner. "You submarine boys had it plenty rugged."

"Not as rugged as this civilian stuff," McKelvey made a sour mouth. "Trying to grab pictures for a living."

The big man froze visibly, not that he had thawed very soft at any time during the colloquy. "You can't soap me, pal. You won't get inside pulling that navy-buddies routine. Scram."

"But—"

"You sneaked one shot of me of guarding these gates. Be satisfied. Don't press your luck. You might throw snake eyes and come up with a busted camera. Or a busted head."

McKelvey backed a discreet distance away. "Look, sailor. This is front-page material. Murder is always front-page material. You know that."

"I know I'm working for Phil Lathrop at very sweet wages, and he gave orders nobody gets inside the estate. Now blow."

"But listen," McKelvey said with desperation. "It's important news the way Lathrop's holed up here in his country place with all you armed guards patroling the grounds. Any time a millionaire figures he's in that much danger it makes headlines. And pix."

"You got one of me," the big man said.

"I've got to get some inside shots, too. Look, you can hang onto my coattails every step I take—"

"Desert my post? Fat chance."

"All right, assign one of the others to me. He can watch every move I make. He can keep a gun on me the whole time. If I do something haywire, plug me. How about it?"

The big man scowled darkly. "I got enough of your gab." He consulted his watch. "It's now exactly four o'clock. If you ain't on your horse by one minute after four, you get lumps." A red sun sent slanted rays on his heavy face, emphasizing the scowl. "Don't think I'm fooling, chum." He advanced toward McKelvey and there was suddenly a brown cowhide blackjack in his hand.

THEN, just as suddenly, he put the blackjack back in his pocket and peered down the short private road which led from the main highway to this principal entrance to the Lathrop estate. A shiny station wagon had turned into the side road and was coming fast—recklessly fast, it seemed to McKelvey. He wondered if it would be able to stop before it crashed headlong into the gate's ornamental ironwork.

It stopped, all right. There was a girl at the wheel, a small girl with red-gold hair, a face at once quizzical and wise beyond its years, and a figure so daintily feminine it brought a tightness to your throat. She wore blue and white-checked gingham play togs: wrap-around skirt over abbreviated shorts, bobby sox and moccasins, and a bra tied with a bow at the back. Her bare shoulders and legs were creamy and smoothly tanned. "Open up, Slugsy," she called to the big man. Then she looked at McKelvey, and her blue eyes widened in recognition. "Jerry!"

McKelvey didn't say anything.

The big guy, Slugsy, moved nearer to the car. "You know this fella, Mrs. Lathrop?"

"Know Jerry McKelvey? Why he's an old friend of mine."

"He's a reporter."

McKelvey said: "Photographer, not reporter. *Daily Blade.*"

"Back at your old job, Jerry?" Cynthia smiled at him.

He nodded. "Yes. Hello, Cynthia." He smiled back at her, but the smile was twisted and wry. "It's been a long time."

"It's okay, Sluggsy," she told the guard. "He can ride up with me."

Slugsy made a fist. "He's been trying to talk me into letting him inside."

"Really?" Cynthia Lathrop said. "Well, all right. He can ride up to the house with me. Hop in, Jerry."

McKelvey shook his head. He had no wish to ride anywhere with Cynthia. He didn't think he could stand being that close to her. Some things a man just couldn't take. "No thanks. Thanks very much, but no thanks."

"Hey, what is this?" Slugsy growled. He circled one of the twin ornamental sun dials which flanked the gates; approached McKelvey truculently. "First you make a damn' nuisance of yourself wanting in. Then when you get the offer, you say no. I don't get it, bud. You don't make sense."

McKelvey couldn't bring himself to say that he and the lovely Cynthia had once been engaged; that she had handed him the casual brush-off during those four years he'd sweated out the war in the pig boats. You just didn't let your hair down to strangers. Moreover, McKelvey didn't want Cynthia to know how much she'd

hurt him. The brush-off had been casual; his acceptance of it had been just as casual —on the surface. Like most small men, he had an inordinate pride. He was not one to flaunt his wounds in public.

He would be flaunting them, though, if he persisted in refusing Cynthia's offer of a lift and free passage through the gates. She would guess, instinctively, what was wrong with him. Women had intuition about things like that. McKelvey said: "Well, okay, if you don't mind," and got into the station wagon. He waved to Slugsy, who unlocked the wrought-iron grille and swung it around on well-oiled hinges. The station wagon took off like a shot from a gun.

ON THE winding path up to the Lathrop mansion, McKelvey eyed the girl at the wheel. "You're looking swell, Cynthia."

"Jerry—"

"Yes?"

"Don't be sore at me, Jerry."

"Sore? Why should I be sore?"

"Because I married Phil while you were away."

"That's nothing to be sore about, Cynthia." No, of course not, he thought. We were only kids when we were in love. You were a cigarette girl in a honkytonk night spot and I was a punk, a cub photog. We were only kids and we had the world by the tail on a downgrade drag. We had all the romance there was, but no money. That's what you wanted, baby: money and lots of it. Well, you got it and I got what the little boy shot at. Nothing, period. You're a beautiful, mercenary little dish, Cynthia, and I ought to hate your guts. But I don't. Just sitting here with you in this car ties me up in knots, inside. I wish to God I could forget you gave me the go-by and got hitched to that lousy drunken playboy of a Phil Lathrop. I wish I could forget I ever knew you.

She cast a sidewise glance at him. "What are you thinking about, Jerry?"

"Nothing much," he came out of his sullen reverie. "I was wondering how you feel being the wife of a killer?"

"Jerry, that's unkind."

He shrugged. "The truth isn't always kind, hon."

"When Phil shot Mike Dominotti it was self-defense."

"That doesn't make Dominotti less dead. Six months ago he was the town's top underworld character. Big shot gambler, backstage political boss, king of corruption. Today he's ashes in an urn—a handful of dust in a bronze container. Put there by a chunk of lead from your husband's pistol."

"It was self-defense," she repeated. "Dominotti cheated him."

"So he claimed."

"It was true. And when Phil called him on it—"

"I heard the testimony. Dominotti pulled a gun. So naturally Phil pulled his gun, too. And shot first."

Her lips were a firm line. "The jury believed it. They acquitted him."

"Sure, I know. So who am I to question the story, huh?"

Her voice got brittle. "That's right. Who are you to question the story?"

"Let's not quarrel about it," he said. "Far as I'm concerned, it's just an academic discussion. All I'm interested in is the recoil."

"Recoil?"

"The aftermath. The word going around that some of Dominotti's hard guys are out to get revenge. They waited to see what the law would do. The law didn't do anything. So now the heat's on. Funny, a guy as rich as Phil having to duck for cover like this. Having to hire a squad of armed guards and—" He let the sentence go unfinished; smiled and tapped his camera. "Anyhow it makes news. It makes pictures. Thanks for getting me inside, Cynthia."

She parked under the mansion's Colonial *porte-chere*. "I had a reason."

"Oh. You weren't just being charitable to an old friend?"

"Stop being sarcastic, Jerry. It's not like you. Not like the you I used to know."

I'm not the me you used to know he thought. I quit being the Jerry McKel

The jury believed the story, that Dominotti had drawn first.

vey you used to know, the day I got your letter telling me you were Mrs. Phil Lathrop. I was in Sydney when the letter got to me. Sydney, Australia. My sub shoved off next day. I stole me a hunk of raw meat from the galley when we put out of Sydney Harbor, and I wrapped the meat around the letter and threw it overboard. A shark got it. That's how I felt about it. That's how it was when I loved you. I gave my heart to a shark. But you're such a beautiful shark, Cynthia. . . .

She broke in on his thoughts. "Aren't you going to ask me what my reason was for bringing you up to the house, Jerry?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Tell me."

"It's Phil. Ever since he heard Dominotti's gunsels were after him, ever since he came here and hired all those guards, he—he's been impossible. Drunk all the time. Drunk and mean."

"Don't tell me you're starting to regret your marriage?"

"I'm not regretting it. I want to salvage it."

"I guess I'm a little dense. I don't follow you."

She smiled. "Phil knows I—used to be in love with you. When he sees you with me now I'm hoping he'll get jealous. Jealousy may sober him."

"So I'm to substitute for the Keeley Cure. McKelvey pinch hitting for Alcoholics Anonymous."

"Do you mind, Jerry?"

"You're damned right I mind," he said bitterly. "And I think you've got a hell of a crust to ask me. What difference does it make to me whether your marriage floats or goes on the rocks? You got what you always wanted. Dough. In your book, dough and happiness are the same thing."

"So you *are* sore at me." A hint of reproach was in her tone as she got out of the station wagon.

McKelvey got out, too. "Sorry, Cynthia. I let my temper come unstuck. I didn't mean to. If you want to know the truth, I didn't even intend to see you this afternoon if I could avoid it. I hoped to grab some shots and get out without running into you."

"That's all right. I had no right to ask you for a favor. You don't owe me anything." She curled her lips cynically. "Go ahead and take your pictures of our armed fortress here."

As she turned away from him, he started to thank her. But before he could form the words, a man came darting out of the house with an air of suppressed excitement. "Cynthia!"

McKelvey knew the guy. He had seen him often enough at young Lathrop's murder trial. Ronald Adair was Lathrop's personal secretary and looked as theatrically handsome as his name sounded. He was tall and lanky in British tweeds; sandy-haired, virile, tawny from the sun. The way he darted to Cynthia and slipped a protective arm about her waist made McKelvey wonder a little. He wondered even more when he heard Adair say: "Cynthia darling, I just found Phil in his study—he's—Cynthia, you've got to be brave—"

Oh come now, McKelvey thought. Whatever your news is, do you have to ham it up like a juvenile in a two-bit stock troupe? Still, maybe it was the guy's excuse to get his arm around his employer's wife. . . .

"What is it, Ron?" Cynthia said. "What is it you're trying to tell me?" She pulled free of him, ostentatiously.

"Phil—it's Phil—" Adair's voice was like a flute out of control.

"What about him?"

"He's in the study—and he's—dead!"

Cynthia's cheeks whitened. "You're joking."

"I tell you he's dead. He's—murdered."

THERE was an unreality about Adair's lack of composure that planted a small seed of suspicion in McKelvey's mind even as he sprang toward the secretary. "Murdered?" McKelvey snapped out.

"Y-yes."

"How do you know?"

For an instant Adair's fluttery nervousness seemed to desert him, as if unwittingly and inadvertently he had dropped the mask he was wearing. "I know it must be murder because it can't be suicide," his answer had an edge to it. "Nobody but a contortionist could shoot himself through the back. And Phil Lathrop wasn't a contortionist."

"Shot?" Cynthia gasped. "In the b-back?"

The secretary gulped noisily. "Yes. I walked in to get a book and found him lying there in a pool of fresh blood, and—"

Pool of fresh blood. McKelvey thought. That sounds wrong. The average person doesn't talk that way. It sounds like a line from a cheap melodrama.

Cythia turned. "Jerry, what am I g-going to do?"

More phoney dialogue, McKelvey reflected. She didn't say: *Are you sure he's dead?* or *Take me to him,* or even *We've got to phone the police.* No. She just stood there looking wistful and pathetic and helpless and clinging-vine feminine, asking Jerry McKelvey to tell her what she was going to do. She didn't press Adair for details, didn't go rushing into the house, didn't do any of the various things a normal woman would do under the circumstances. She seemed to take it for granted she was now a widow, with an indifference to her husband's death that was almost callous in its disregard for the amenities.

"Jerry, what am I g-going to do?"

"Look things over first," he answered briskly. "And put in a call to the cops. And notify Slugsy nobody's to leave the grounds until the law gets here."

Ronald Adair made a vague, ineffectual gesture. "Slugsy's isn't the only exit. There are two other gates."

"Guarded?"

"Yes."

"Notify them too. Then police headquarters. Go on, get moving. Cynthia, you come with me. Take me to the study."

She seemed not to hear him. She was watching Adair as he trotted off on his errands. There was a proprietary look in her eyes; or was it predatory? McKelvey couldn't be sure, but it was worth a moment's thought. Presently he spoke to her again. "Take me to the study, Cynthia."

"Yes. Yes, Jerry. Whatever you say." They went into the house, and up to the second floor. But when they came to the door of the study, Cynthia went no farther. McKelvey entered the room alone—which was just as well, he decided when he saw the dead man.

JUST as Adair had said, Phil Lathrop had been shot through the back. He would shake no more dice with big shot gamblers like the late Mike Dominotti whom he had killed in alleged self-defense. Unless he met Dominotti over a green baize table in hell, which was not likely. The bullet had ranged under Lathrop's left shoulder-blade and found his heart, and he had fallen forward on his face; dead, very likely, before he hit the floor.

In falling, though, he had made an instinctive gesture to soften the impact. He had put out his hands, probably by pure reflex. One arm, the right, was crumpled under him at an unpleasant angle. The left arm was stretched outward and the wrist had struck the edge of a chair. There was quite a lot of blood, McKelvey noticed. He also noticed some tiny fragments of glass on the thick carpet, glittering like miniature jewels.

When he examined these more closely he saw that some of them actually were jewels. Diamonds. They had fallen from the smashed strap watch on Lathrop's left wrist, where it had hit that chair. The watch crystal was shattered, the platinum case dented and some of the surrounding ornamental gems had dropped out of their gaudy setting. The hands were stopped at four o'clock even.

Four o'clock. That was when McKelvey had been jawing with the guard named Slugsy at the main gate. That was when Slugsy had been telling him he had one minute to get on his horse if he didn't want to be lumped up. Four o'clock. At that very moment, Phil Lathrop had died.

There was nothing McKelvey could do for a corpse, except take some pictures. He snapped three, from different angles. Then he went out to Cynthia in the hallway.

"At least he didn't suffer," he told her.

"Thanks, Jerry." Just like that. No tears. No hysteria.

He said: "There's one thing I don't understand, though."

"What?"

"You've got servants here, haven't you?"

She nodded. "Several."

"Why didn't they hear the shot? I wonder."

"I don't know. It's a pretty solid house. Substantial walls and heavy doors. And most of the staff would be downstairs this time of day. All of them, in fact."

"Just the same, somebody should have heard it and investigated. Why didn't they?"

She worried her lower lip with her even white teeth. "Ronnie did."

"No. He said he went in the study to get a book and found the body. There was nothing mentioned about him hearing a shot." Then McKelvey added very deliberately: "Unless, of course, he fired it himself."

Her reaction to this was surprisingly prosaic; she neither indicated indignation nor registered shock at the thought. "Is that an accusation, Jerry?"

"Not necessarily. I was just going over the possibilities."

"No matter how remote, eh?" she said. "No matter how utterly absurd."

"It may not be so damned absurd."

"But why would Ronnie murder Phil?"

"Look, Cynthia. I've got eyes. You and Adair are pretty thick. Obviously the guy's gone on you. He calls you darling and he can't keep his hands off you. And you stand for it, which indicates something or other."

Her eyes were as clear and cold as a Winter morning. "You've got an evil mind, Jerry. Get it out of the gutter. Wait

here a minute; I want to try an experiment." She walked quickly down the corridor to another room, went in, came out again. There was a small automatic in her hand.

"Hey!" McKelvey eyed the weapon warily.

She extended it to him, butt first. "Take it. Go into the study and close the door. Fire a shot."

"What for?"

"For the sound," she said. "I'm going halfway down the stairs. I'll be listening. If it's very loud, I'll be like you: I'll start wondering why none of the servants heard it and came up to investigate."

McKelvey humored her. He went into the murder room, closed the door, and waited a long moment. While he waited he examined the gun for signs of recent discharge —and found none. The clip was full, the barrel unfouled, and there was no tell-tale odor of burned cordite. He jacked a cartridge into the chamber, aimed at a corner of the room and fired. The report seemed disappointingly flat and uncharacteristic, more like the pop of an undersized firecracker than a .25 auto. Maybe it was a trick of acoustics because of the room's heavy draperies, McKelvey thought.

He reopened the door and went into the hall. Cynthia came back up the stairs to him. "It wasn't loud at all," she said. "I could scarcely hear it. I don't believe anybody would have heard it down on the lower floor."

"That seems to be that," he said, and returned the weapon to her. "But it doesn't clear Adair. If anything, it puts him under more suspicion than ever."

She narrowed her eyes. "How so?"

"He could have killed your husband without a soul knowing it. Then he could have left the study, waited a while, walked back in, pretended to find the body, and rushed down to meet you outside."

"And his motive?"

"So you'd be free. So you'd be a widow. So he could marry you. After a respectable period of mourning, of course."

"You heel," she said distinctly. "You contemptible heel."

"So I'm a heel," The anger and the hurt that had been in him ever since that day in Sydney Harbor came to the surface now. "Do you deny he's in love with you?"

"I don't deny anything. I'm not interested in your filthy theories."

"Because they're too close to the target?"

"Get out. Get out of this house."

"Maybe it goes even deeper," he said recklessly. "Perhaps you were in it, too. Maybe that's why you took care to be out in your car when it happened. That gave you an alibi for four o'clock. It put you in the clear while Adair did your killing for you." McKelvey wasn't quite certain he believed these things he was saying, but he derived a dour satisfaction from saying them. He wanted to hurt her, and this was one way of doing it.

IT WAS the wrong way. An avalanche hit him. Ronald Adair had come back into the house and ascended a rear stairway, searching for Cynthia. Now the secretary walked along the hall just in time to overhear the last part of McKelvey's accusations. He leaped at McKelvey and floored him with a rabbit punch to the nape of the neck.

"You stinking swine!" he said.

More of that dime novel dialogue, McKelvey thought, and picked himself up. He swung at the bigger man.

Adair was good. He was too damned good for a guy as handsome as he was. His matinee-idol face was deceptive; his lankiness fooled you. He parried McKelvey's punch and countered with a punishing left jab to the mouth; followed it with a right cross. McKelvey's knees buckled and his head felt light. His ears were buzzing. The guy hit him again and he went down.

"Kick him," Cynthia said harshly. "Kick him in the face, Ronnie. He accused you of murdering Phil. He accused me of scheming it with you."

The girl I used to love, McKelvey thought hazily. Wanting to see me get my face kicked in. He lurched upright, staggered into a smashing blow on the jaw. He didn't fall, though. Adair caught him, propped him against the wall, and began methodically beating him. McKelvey felt his lips puffing and splitting. He couldn't see, now.

His eyes were almost swollen shut. He couldn't breathe very well, either; something was wrong with his nose. Probably broken, he decided. He stopped trying to protect himself.

After a while, Adair seemed to tire of hitting him. "Shall I heave him out, Cynthia?"

"I've got a better idea. Go get Slugsy Minotti and bring him up to the house."

"But he's supposed to stay on guard at the main gate and see that nobody leaves," Adair said dubiously.

Her voice was crisp with authority. "Post somebody else there until the police come. Bring me Slugsy."

Adair went away. McKelvey moved drunkenly to the stairs; hunkered down on the top step and sat there, resting his battered face in his hands and trying to keep from going insane. Rage filled him like a hot churning tide, and he tasted the full meaning of hatred. If Cynthia hadn't had that little .25 automatic in her hand, aimed casually at him, he thought he would have found the strength to get up and kill her. As it was, he sat quietly. Quietly except for his breathing. That was noisy enough.

"You asked for it," Cynthia said.

He didn't answer her.

She said: "So you've learned to keep your mouth shut. But too late."

He didn't look at her.

"And you're not going to frame Ronnie for murder. Or me, either, Jerry. Because the frame's going to be on you if it's on anybody."

"Me?" he broke his silence. His voice sounded odd to him. It was a stranger's voice, harsh, croaking, not his own.

SHE SAID: "You fired a gun in the study, remember? And I believe the police have a way of testing a person's hands to prove if they fired a gun. Any gun."

"Yes. Dermal nitrate. The paraffin test. So that's why you had me make that dizzy experiment. Laying the groundwork eh? I should have realized."

"You had already begun hinting your suspicions of Ronnie. And I wasn't going to have that," she said calmly.

"Why?"

"He's innocent, that's why. So I had to think of something to stop you if you carried your suspicions too far."

"And I did carry them too far, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Otherwise you would have dropped the dermal nitrate idea. It was your hole card, to use against me if you had to."

"Yes."

"And now you intend to use it."

"You forced my hand," she said.

"Do you really think Adair's innocent, Cynthia?"

"I do."

"What makes you so positive?"

"He wouldn't kill anybody. I know him."

"And love him?"

"Could be," she said. "Not that I wanted to. I tried to make a go of it with Phil, but this had been growing. And now that Phil's dead—"

McKelvey's puffed lips grimaced. "Now that he's murdered," he amended. "Now that he's out of the way you can go ahead and dive into your new romance."

"Ronnie didn't murder him."

"You keep saying that."

"Because I believe it."

He said: "But will the police?"

"I think so."

"You're too optimistic, Cynthia. You forget there's a corpse in the study, a murdered man. Wherever there's murder there's got to be a murderer. This estate's guarded. Nobody can have escaped. That means the killer must still be here somewhere. Since Phil was afraid some of Mike Dominotti's gunsels might knock him off, it's natural to assume he checked on all his armed guards before hiring them. Servants, too. What motive would any of the staff have for killing your husband? None. And yet *somebody* had a motive. That's where your precious Ronald Adair comes into it."

"No," she said. "It's where you come into it."

"You'll never make it stick."

"I can try. I used to be engaged to you, and then I got married to Phil instead. Being jealous, you came here and shot him."

McKelvey grimaced again. It was ac-

tually a smile, although it didn't resemble a smile. "Phil died at four o'clock. His smashed wrist-watch shows that. And at four o'clock I was outside the main gate trying to talk myself past your man Slugsy."

"I think I can persuade Slugsy to change that."

IT was patent that she had thought of all the possibilities. A tiny shiver coursed along McKelvey's spine. He felt as if clammy walls were closing in on him. This is the girl I wanted to be my wife, he thought, and now she's planning to feed me to the lions. Planning to sacrifice me to save her sweetie whether he's guilty or not guilty. And she might damned well get away with it. Aloud he said: "Let's call it off, Cynthia."

"Call what off?"

"I won't put the finger on Adair. And you don't put the finger on me."

"I told you it was too late," she said flatly. "You've pointed out that the police are bound to suspect Ronnie, even if you don't say anything. You've also pointed out that there has to be an arrest."

"So I take the fall, eh?"

"You take the fall."

As she said this, Adair came into the house and brought Slugsy with him. They walked up the stairs, skirting McKelvey sitting on the top step. Cynthia said: "Slugsy, my husband has been murdered."

"Yeah, so Mr. Adair told me."

"He was killed at four o'clock."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. This man here shot him," she indicated McKelvey.

McKelvey stood up, painfully. "It's a frame, Sailor. At four o'clock I was at the gate, talking to you, trying to get in. You know that."

"Yeah," Slugsy said. "I remember. I looked at my watch, and it was just four. I told you to shove off."

Cynthia said: "Never mind that, Slugsy. When the police come, I want you to tell them McKelvey was at your gate at three-thirty. And that you let him in."

There was an odd dignity in the man's reply. "But that'd be a lie, Mrs. Lathrop."

"A thousand dollar lie for you," she said tersely.

Adair cleared his throat. "A thousand dollars is a lot of money, Slugsy."

"So was thirty pieces of silver," McKelvey said. "They're trying to railroad me to the chair, Sailor. On your perjured testimony."

Slugsy shifted on his feet, uncomfortably. "Not *my* perjured testimony, Bud. You was talking to me at four o'clock and I don't change that for anybody."

"Thanks," McKelvey said. He looked at Cynthia. "Seems as though you've struck a snag, Hon. Out of the whole shebang there are just three of us with alibis. You because you were out riding. Slugsy because he was talking to me. And me because I was talking to Slugsy. Everybody else goes through the wringer. Including your friend, Adair, here." He sarcastically stressed the word friend.

Adair moved toward him, fists balled, mouth grim. "Maybe you'd like another beating."

"Hey, none of that," Slugsy said. "From the looks of him he's took enough shoving around for one session. You start picking on him and you'll have to pick on me, too." Surprisingly he took up a protective stance in front of McKelvey. "Try it, handsome."

Cynthia said: "Slugsy, you're fired."

"Okay, I'm fired." He took McKelvey's arm. "Let's blow, Bud."

"Now wait a minute," Cynthia said.

SLUGSY leered at her, ignoring the little automatic in her upraised hand. "Lady, if you think that peashooter can scare a guy that was under the Jap guns at Pearl Harbor, and the Sulu Sea, and a lot of other brawls, you're crazy. I been where there was plenty of real shooting." He tugged at McKelvey. "Come on, pal."

"Sure." Maybe there was something to that navy-buddies routine after all, McKelvey thought. He walked downstairs and out of the house with the hulking ex-sailor, and they took a short cut through the grounds to the main gate; it was only a brief walk by not following the winding auto-

mobile road. McKelvey's own battered little coupé was parked outside the estate. A substitute guard stood at the gate in Slugsy's old spot, but he opened up readily enough at Slugsy's command. McKelvey said: "Want to go to town with me, Sailor?"

"No. I better stay until the cops come. They ought to be getting here any minute now. Shall I tell them they can get you at the *Daily Blade* if they want you?"

McKelvey nodded and climbed into his car. "Yes. And thanks a lot, Sailor." He drove off, swiftly, thinking now about his job. He had pictures to develop and print for reproduction in tomorrow morning's bulldog edition of the *Blade;* pix that would score a clean beat on the opposition sheets. Those shots of the murdered Phil Lathrop's corpse sprawled in the study ought to be worth a salary hike, he reflected as he drove. He'd been lucky. They had cost him a hell of a thumping at the hands of Ronald Adair, but there was compensation for that, too. Never again would he dream bittersweet dreams of Cynthia. Not after the way she had tried to frame him. Not after she had stood and ordered Adair to kick him in the face. I'm cured, he thought. It took a long time, but now I'm cured. I'm like a guy that finally finds the right medicine for a sickness I figured was permanent. . . .

He tried to whistle through his swollen lips, and he was still trying, later, when he was in his darkroom developing his negatives.

And then, as he struck off positive enlargements, the whistling stopped. A startled oath choked in his throat.

Oblivious to his job, oblivious to the fact that he was supposed to turn in those damp prints to the city editor, he clutched them in his hand and went racing out of the building. He piled into his coupé and headed out of town; roared along the highway that led to the Lathrop country estate. Out of a clear sky, literally as well as figuratively, he had found the key to the mystery of Phil Lathrop's killing; and that same key would unlock the doorway of McKelvey's vengeance. Every bruise, every contusion on his aching face and body would be paid for. And it was Ronald Adair who would do the paying.

The cops were all over the Lathrop estate when McKelvey got there: county sheriff's men, state police, even a tech squad loaned by the city homicide bureau. Uniformed officers roamed around the grounds; plainclothes dicks swarmed the house, where servants and the slain Lathrop's private bodyguards had all been rounded up for questioning. They had all been herded into the mansion's ornate ballroom on the lower floor, and as McKelvey strode in he saw Cynthia and Adair at the far end of the room being sweated by a police lieutenant named Sontag. They didn't look happy.

They would be even less happy, presently, McKelvey reflected. He called: "Just a minute, Sontag."

Sontag scowled at him. "Nothing for the newspapers just yet, Jerry. Scram."

"I've got evidence," McKelvey waved his pictures. Then he spotted the hulking Slugsy and beckoned to him. "I'll be needing you, Sailor."

SLUGSY joined him. So did Sontag. "What evidence?" the homicide official demanded.

This is it, McKelvey thought. This is it, and I hope to God I'm right. I hope it works. It's *got* to work. He said: "Phil Lathrop was killed at four o'clock. Maybe you've already heard that I was here around that time, trying to get in."

"Yes. So I was told."

"Just before Mrs. Lathrop came along and brought me through the main gate and up to the house in her station wagon, I'd sneaked a snap of the gate guard, Slugsy Minotti, here."

Slugsy said: "Sure. That was a couple minutes before four. I looked at my watch right after that and it was four even."

"That's when you lied, Sailor," McKelvey exploded his atomic bomb. "There are two ornamental sun dials at the gate, one on each side. They both show up as plain as day in the picture I took of you. They're evidence out of a clear sky. Maybe one sun dial could be haywire, but not two."

(*Continued on page* 92)

Gas-fed flames lit up the front of the shed, and made shooting easy.

Illustrated by Newton Alfred

"I'M AILEEN COURT, and this is my sister Thelma. We have just arrived from Australia. We wish to see Counsellor Arnold Barker at once."

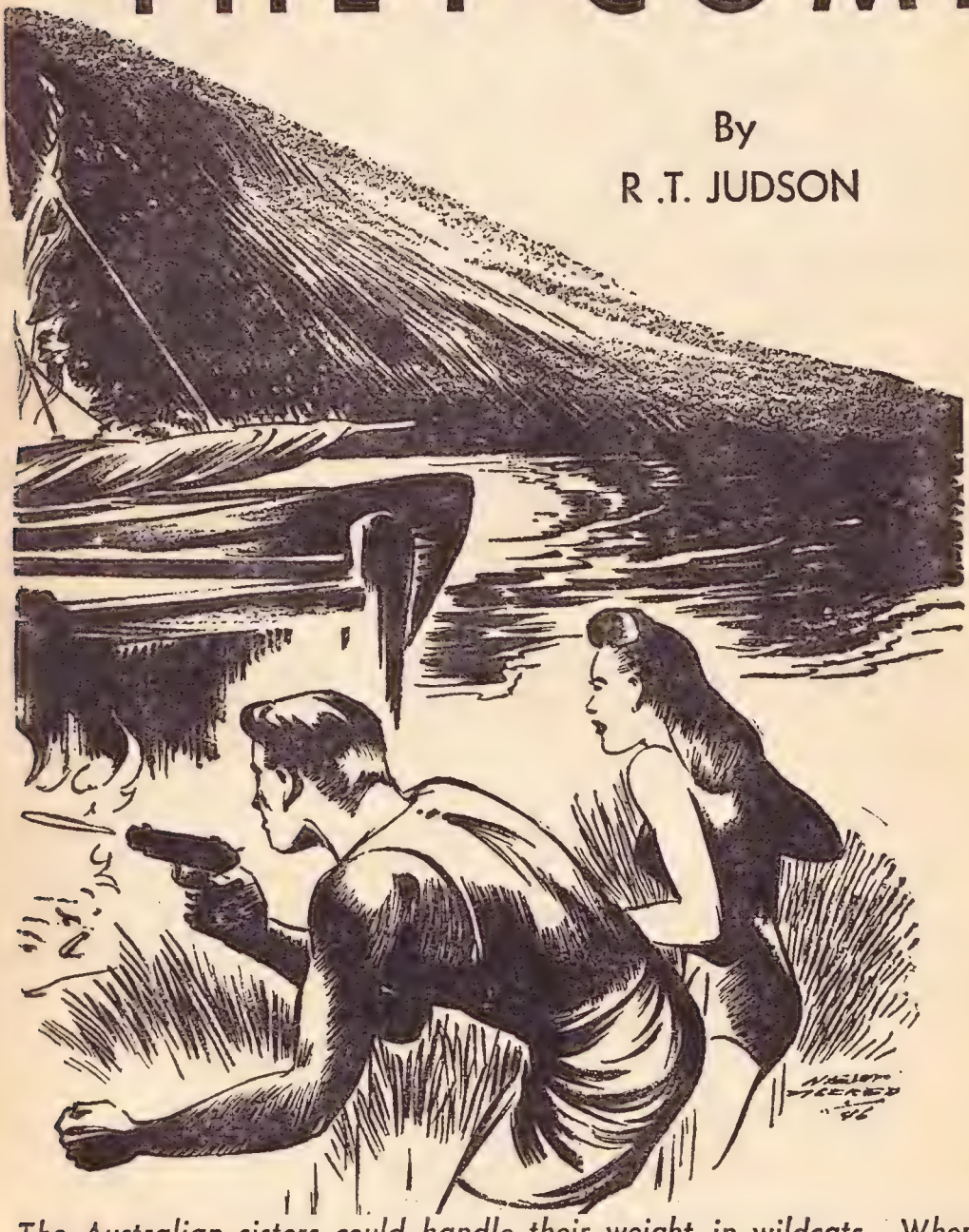
The speaker was red-headed. It was a natural color and bright like a flame. Sister Thelma was also a gorgeous redhead. But her hair had a different tinge, like the glowing of polished copper.

Three girl typists in the front office of Attorney Arnold Barker, in Miami Avenue off Flagler Street, looked up with eyes snapping. The three gave a combined sniff and a snicker. Two of the typists had boy friends in the Land Down Under.

Their general opinion of Aussie girls gave way to scornful giggling. The Aussie sisters

AS DEAD AS THEY COME

By
R .T. JUDSON



The Australian sisters could handle their weight in wildcats. When it came to a two million dollar inheritance, they were twice that good!

could have given them all handicaps and beaten them from neck to heels on the delightful curve of their tall figures. Their faces were differently shaped, but a man would have had trouble making up his mind which was the prettier.

The outer office of Attorney Arnold Barker maintained a sort of wornout dignity. Along with this went a male reception clerk with slick black hair and a 4-F chest expansion. He thought he was quite a lad with the ladies, seeing there were so many girls left behind.

The male clerk put on his best condescending smirk.

"Mr. Barker doesn't bother himself with the troubles of foreign war brides," he announced, getting the expected snicker of applause from the three typists. "Mr. Barker wouldn't see you even if he were in, Peaches."

"My name is still Aileen, and it's none of your confounded business why we wish to see Counsellor Barker," flashed the redhead called Aileen.

Aileen's blue-green eyes glinted with warning. Her sister Thelma turned slowly speculative brown eyes upon the snickering girl typists.

"From what I can see, Aileen, you don't have to guess twice why the American boys are picking out so many Aussie girls," said Thelma, of the coppery hair, with malicious intent. "Also," and she turned her slow eyes upon the 4-F male clerk, "these American girls must be suffering with what the Yankee army men left behind."

The male clerk drew himself up indignantly on his skinny legs. The Aussie called Aileen laughed musically. The typists by this time were staring at the oddly fringed jackets the Aussie sisters were wearing.

"Must have come right out of what they call the bush," put out one typist in a hoarse whisper meant to be heard.

She didn't know how right she was. The soft-hand-worked jackets were of the finest tanned kangaroo hide.

The 4-F male clerk recovered his poise somewhat. He stepped closer to the girl Aileen at the rail.

"While Mr. Barker doesn't bother himself with war-bride cases, if you happen to be lonesome, how's about me picking up a pal and showing you girls some of the bright spots in Miami?" simpered the clerk. "Whassay, Peaches?"

The male clerk was close enough to make a mistake. The milky smooth cheek of Aileen, with her impudently tilted nose and a few sun freckles, was too much for the smirking clerk to resist.

"I'll bet we can make you forget—" The clerk walked right on into it.

He reached out a thin hand and lightly pinched the cheek of the Aussie called Aileen. The Aussie girl did not speak. It was doubtful if the three typists had time to observe what happened.

Aileen's right hand snapped out with the speed of a striking snake. Her long white fingers were hooked behind the neck of the romantic clerk. The clerk's squawk was almost a scream as he came off his feet, giving a splendid imitation of the man on the flying trapeze before he landed in a crumpled heap against the outer office wall.

THE clerk started to scramble to his feet, swearing. It was then that the little Aussie called Thelma went into action. She assisted the clerk from the floor and he sailed right on over her head to crash head-on into the private switchboard.

"We came up here peacefully to claim two millions in diamonds!" announced Thelma without batting one beautiful eye.

The three typists were clustered together, evidently trying to escape from these crazy Aussies. The switchboard was a complete wreck, but the 4-F male clerk had all his fighting mad aroused. He was still game enough to make another pass at the Aussie called Aileen.

This time the Aussie girl took him with what might have been a stranglehold learned from some Commando sergeant. She used him as a battering ram to break through the door of the private office, heedless of the broken glass showering around her.

Aileen left the male clerk on the floor. He was out cold this time.

"We'll have to call again, Thelma," said

Gun metal crashed against the back of his skull, and he ceased to care for anything at all

Aileen. "Counsellor Barker is not in his office."

By this time one of the terrified typists had made it to a corridor phone. As the Aussie sisters gathered up their hand-worked purse's also of soft kangaroo leather, Thelma's purse popped open.

A very efficient army automatic hit the

floor with a metallic ring and bounced. Perhaps the safety catch had been off. The gun exploded and its slug caromed wildly off the office rail and splintered the glass of a picture frame on the wall.

At this inauspicious moment one Bart Cassidy, plainclothes dick who had been in the building, entered in response to the call for help made by the scared typist. Cassidy swallowed hard when he lamped the pair of redheads and, in spite of his sworn duty, he wondered which he would pick—Aileen, of the blue-green eyes and flaming hair, or Thelma, of the big brown eyes and the deeper coppery sheen to her well-poised round head.

Cassidy took in the damage at a glance, heard the reviving male clerk yammering for the Aussies to be taken to jail, and looked at the army automatic which Thelma was just then restoring to her purse.

That these two lovely creatures had practically ruined one clerk and wrecked the outer office of Attorney Barker seemed inconceivable to young Detective Cassidy. But he had his duty to do.

"Sorry it is I am," announced Cassidy, confronting the brown-eyed Thelma. "But I'll have to take you in. You girls oughta stay out of these cocktail bars. I'm havin' to charge you with disorderly conduct, assault and battery, and illegal possession of firearms, which will probably give you the next six months to cool off."

Cassidy added, "I'll take that gun," and reached for Thelma's purse.

A white arm as lithe and strong as a young python was suddenly wrapped around Cassidy's throat from behind. That was Aileen. Cassidy received the purse from Thema. But he got it squarely between the eyes with the hard weight of the army gun inside.

The department dick folded up, closed his eyes and not even the screaming of the fleeing typists could awaken him.

"We do not want to go to jail Thelma," said Aileen calmly. "I think we should leave at once."

"We'll have to go pronto, as that Yankee army sergeant always said, Aileen," advised Thelma. "If we descend by elevator, someone might interfere with us. I saw a fire escape at the corridor window."

The Aussie redheads departed by way of the fire escape.

CHAPTER II

Violent Redheads

IM (THE OWL) O'HARA hesitated over taking the phone call. It was now 2.30 a.m. in the editorial rooms of the Miami *Tribune*. Owl O'Hara had promised to sit in on the poker game starting at 3 a.m. in the club the gang called Poverty Flats.

Watkins, the city editor, growled at his ace police reporter. Owl O'Hara had been so long a veteran digger-upper of crime in all its brackets that virtually all the city detective department was out to hang up his hide.

Owl's long face didn't fit his name. Still there were dicks in the department who swore O'Hara could see in the dark. Owl considered himself hard-boiled and murder was his meat.

"Y' takin' this call, Owl?" grunted fat and graying city-editor Watkins. "Voice sounds like a blues singer who's strained her V strings."

Owl O'Hara had a hunch then. That kind of voice would fit one of the redheaded Aussies who had been giving him the jimmies for the past two weeks. Either Aileen or Thelma.

"And why would either one be buzzin' me at this hour?" muttered Owl O'Hara. "I'd be in a jam with Chief Martin if he even suspected I knew the pair of violent outlanders, not to mention livin' in the same Coral Gables apartments."

O'Hara glanced at his watch, figuring on the minutes left to arrive at the poker game after one of these outlander Aussies finished pegging him an earful. O'Hara's first discovery was that he wasn't sitting in on any poker game at 3 a.m.

"Mr. O'Hara?" The voice was throaty and deep. "I can't waste time. This is Aileen. There will be a killing if you don't come to your Venetian Apartment as fast

as you can push your car. You may be too late even then—"

"Hold everything!" snapped O'Hara pushing black hair out of his agate-blue eyes. "What's this tripe? What's—?"

"There isn't time, but a killer with a gun is trying to break in right now. He's prying at the window."

"For the luva Pete!" exclaimed O'Hara. 'You're on a phone. Whyn't you call the cops?"

"Because, as you well know, O'Hara, Thelma and I do not want to be locked up for the next six months!" replied the deep voice. "Now will you please hurry? This killer has me cornered alone, and in your apartment, O'Hara."

"What the—? In *my* apartment?" yelled O'Hara. "An' what are you doing—?"

He was abruptly cut off by what sounded like his apartment phone cradle crashing to the floor. He thought he heard a scream, but he wasn't sure.

"Of all the nitwit dames!" complained O'Hara, making sure his .38 was in its shoulder holster. He said to Watkins: "If there's a call for me, say I got tired and I'm hittin' the hay for the night."

Watkins had gimlet eyes and they bored into him.

"From what I heard of your end of the conversation, and the feel you made for your rod, I don't think it's the hay you're figurin' on hittin'," exclaimed Watkins sarcastically. "Chubby! Just grab up a handful of plates and take a little ride with Mr. O'Hara!"

Chubby Merkle would climb a ship's mast in a hurricane for good pictures, but he couldn't stand the sight of blood.

"Hell's bells, chief," pleaded O'Hara. "This is a personal matter."

"Get on your horse, Chubby!" snapped the dyspeptic city editor. "There ain't any personal business on your beat before three o'clock, Mr. O'Hara. And who were you advisin' to call the cops?"

"C'mon, Chubby!" growled Owl O'Hara.

He figured he could ditch the overweight cameraman somewhere between Miami Avenue and Coral Gables. Which he failed to do.

OWL O'HARA let Chubby and himself into the Venetian Apartments less than twenty minutes after he had taken the call from the red-headed Aussie girl.

"Both of them Aussies are crazier than the kangaroos they brag about ropin' in their native badlands," muttered O'Hara as he failed to detect any sign of bloody carnage about the ornate, tiled first-floor lobby on which his bachelor apartment was located. "This one about a killer just about equals the wild one about hunting two millions in diamonds."

O'Hara reached the thick, wide door of his home, Apartment 1-B. He placed an ear to the panel and listened. If there were death inside, or life either, it gave forth no sound.

O'Hara inserted his key and swung the heavy door open silently. A pink, dozing lamp gave the only light. But that was sufficient to show the body lying in the middle of O'Hara's best and only rug.

Owl O'Hara was far from being a meticulous bachelor, but he had gloomed onto that Oriental rug at a bargain. His first look was for bloodstains, but there were none.

Behind him, Chubby Merkle moaned. The cameraman was never completely at home in the presence of violent death. Nevertheless Chubby was preparing a magnesium bulb and was getting set to snap a picture of the body on O'Hara's rug.

O'Hara had no intention of permitting that picture to appear as a public record that his apartment had become the sudden resting place of a corpse. At the best, this wasn't a nice corpse to have appear in the public prints.

Something, several things had happened to detract from the symmetry of the face. One ear was twisted and torn as if a vicious terrier had made a running jump for it. The nose was a blob of bloody flesh. Both eyes were blackened and closed, and the thick lips of the mouth had been split.

Notwithstanding all this, Owl O'Hara instantly muttered, "Legs Killian! An' that means Gent Barillo is in this somewhere. Which makes horses of funny colors since Barillo lost his tourist sucker play on the

shutdown of Hialeah, Tropical Park, an' the dog tracks. Barillo's neck-deep in some other racket by this time, but where do the Aussies come in?"

The shock of discovering that Legs Killian, one of Barillo's gunsels, had chosen his one arty rug as a last resting place had temporarily caused O'Hara to forget all about the phone call of the redheaded Aussie dame, Aileen, that had summoned him to his suddenly unhappy home.

Chubby Merkle was still moaning, but was going right ahead planning for a magnesium shot of the corpus delicti, as Legs Killian appeared to be. O'Hara had just observed the strange circumstance of Killian having dropped his blue-steel rod within touch of his facile, killer fingers.

"O'Hara! Stop that moon-faced fellow from making a photograph of this kidnaper or myself!"

The abrupt cry came from shadows at one side of the door where O'Hara had not yet glanced. There was action with the throaty but musical words.

It seemed to O'Hara that the heads and writhing bodies of half a dozen snakes hissed past his ear. Chubby yelped behind him with all the pathos of a dog that has just had its foot stepped upon.

The special bulb was torn from Chubby's fingers. It's thin glass splintered and stung O'Hara's cheek as it passed, firmly in the grip of the writhing lashes. O'Hara now had identified the "snakes" as the three-foot split ends of an Australian bush whip.

ONE of the redheaded Aussie lovelies had shown O'Hara such a whip. It had an over-all reach of about six feet. It's split lash ends were weighted with leaden shot This did not add to the pleasure of man or beast upon which it might be used.

At the time, Aileen had carefully explained:

"There are some bad black boys in the back bush where we rope kangaroo. There are also wild dogs. We have heard there are some of what an army sergeant told us are the wolves here in America. The sergeant suggested that our bush whips would stop any of the wolves he had ever seen."

As Chubby lost his flashlight bulb and nursed aching fingers, O'Hara snapped back to the real reason for his sudden summons from the lure of a poker game at Poverty Flats.

"Aileen?" exclaimed O'Hara. "What happened? Why is this gunsel here and why was he trying to kill you?"

"Gunsel?" The throaty voice was puzzled.

The trim girl who came from the shadows could be described as full-blown, but like a creamy white rose at its best before any of the petals begin to fall. Her loosely bound red hair was so flaming that it gave her oval face the appearance of whitest buttermilk.

Sun freckles sprinkled lightly over the broad forehead and along the tilted nose made her skin appear only more milky. It was her firmly curved, naturally red mouth that would have conveyed a warning of danger to any of the army sergeant's predatory wolves.

"Gunsel?" repeated Aileen. "He wasn't trying to kill me. In my room he only said someone he called the boss wanted to see me. Then he pointed that little gun. I ran out of our rooms and over here, because I had no telephone. Mrs. Blossom, the landlady, let me in. But this . . . this gunsel found a window and followed me."

"Then you killed him?" wondered O'Hara.

"That I did not, O'Hara. I had the bush whip hidden behind me. I snapped the gun out of his hand. When he kept coming toward me, I stopped him. He can't be dead."

CHAPTER III

"Here's Your Gunsel!"

"YOU said it, Aileen, he's alive," admitted O'Hara, arising from beside the sleeping Legs Killian. "But when he wakes up, he's gonna wish he was dead. When he wakes up—?" Owl O'Hara permitted his final words to trail off. Which at once produced a choking protest from Chubby Merkle, the *Trib's* ace cameraman as long as there was no blood involved.

"No, O'Hara! No! Not that! I won't be party any more to body-snatchin', what

Millions of mosquitoes and tiny black gnats filled the sheet-iron shack

with Chief Martin achin' to get you or me caught up in something that will put us on the road gang."

An unholy light danced in O'Hara's dark eyes. In the first place, this apparent attempt of the notorious Barillo to snatch one of the redheaded Aussie girls lent some credence to a story that Aileen and Thelma had told him, but which O'Hara was too smart a newshound to believe—or thought he was.

This story of the redheaded violent cuties had to do with a cold two million dollars' worth of diamonds, established as a trust

fund for them by their late father during pre-war days. Which would make their value at least double under existing demand, providing there were such diamonds.

Aileen and Thelma Court had wangled their way over from the land "down under," as they had blandly told Owl O'Hara a few days before, to claim these diamonds. It seemed that this compact fortune had been left by their late father in the hands of an uncle who bore the good, old-fashioned and honest-sounding name of Nathaniel.

"And since Thelma, she's the younger, turned eighteen, we haven't heard a word from Uncle Nathaniel," was what Aileen had told O'Hara. "We've never seen Uncle Nathaniel, but he always had written us a letter twice a month."

Seeing that the redheaded sisters, each in her own way, had plenty of what it takes to bring on the wolves, O'Hara had taken, as he told himself, a strictly friendly interest.

With one of Gent Barillo's hottest gunnies sleeping upon his one and only rug, O'Hara had a sudden reversal of mind concerning the story of the Aussie sisters, Aileen and Thelma Court. If it were true that a top-flight racketeer of the ilk of Barillo had suddenly taken an interest in these Aussie sisters, there might be something to that fabulous story of the diamonds after all. From Aileen's own words, O'Hara could but assume that a kidnapping and not a killing had been intended.

"Where's your sister Thelma?" questioned Owl O'Hara suddenly.

If it were possible, Aileen's face turned a little whiter.

"I wish I knew," she said. "She left here shortly before twelve o'clock saying she was going to the midnight cinema. It's long past the time for her to be home."

O'Hara puzzled for a moment, pushing the thick black hair out of his eyes. "This whole thing has got me backed up," he said musingly. "Gent Barillo does not send out to pick up someone without a reason, and that's not all, Aileen; you wouldn't know who Barillo is, I hope, but how would *he* have your address here at the Venetian Apartments when the cops have had a general alarm out for two days and have not been able notwithstanding to pick your address up?"

"Oh, that?" exclaimed Aileen casually. "After we had the trouble in Lawyer Barker's office, I called Mr. Barker on the telephone and gave him our address. Mr. Barker said it wouldn't be a good idea for us to run into trouble with the police right now, and he would keep it a secret."

"Barker said that?" snapped O'Hara.

"Why, yes. He also said that he hadn't seen or heard from Uncle Nathaniel Court for nearly two months and that his cottage, in some place he called Coconut Grove, has been closed."

BY A SERIES of quick deductions, Owl O'Hara thought he was beginning to add up to the answer. It was an answer, though, that left out the one mysterious figure X of the whereabouts of this Uncle Nathaniel.

"You've really been telling me the truth about a trust fund of two million dollars in diamonds?" questioned O'Hara sharply.

Aileen's bluish-green eyes widened.

"Had you thought at any time we were not telling the truth?" she said indignantly.

"I'm just a poor struggling newshound," said O'Hara, almost plaintively. "I hear, and I even see, so many things I don't believe."

Chubby Merkle was standing in the middle of the room, as shaky as a mold of jelly, trembling with fear. "What're you gonna do?" asked Chubby. "Ain't it about time we called the cops?"

O'Hara's mind was made up for him suddenly. A maliciously humorous light came back into his dark eyes. "Calling the police because one of Gent Barillo's gunsels got himself bush-whipped?" He grinned. "Not any! I've got a better idea."

"No!" pleaded Chubby. "There ain't any better idea."

Two minutes later, O'Hara had emptied an old-fashioned round-topped trunk that he had dragged from the rear of a long clothes closet. The old trunk had many cracks and seemed well enough ventilated. Nevertheless, O'Hara brought a knife from the kitchen and widened some of the cracks.

His hands snatched directly at that venomous sliminess.

Chubby just stood in the middle of the floor and moaned.

The Aussie girl stared at O'Hara. "You intend to bury him alive?" she inquired.

"It'll be worse than that," growled O'Hara. "Before he's finished, Legs Killian probably will wish he *had* been buried alive."

O'Hara gagged the sleeping Legs Killian effectively, before he doubled his body into

the old trunk from which the tray had been removed.

"It won't hurt him to do a bit of thumping around, when he wakes up," observed O'Hara. "Only, I don't want him yelling ahead of time. In a few minutes, Chubby, we're moving some of my old books."

Chubby's teeth were clicking together. O'Hara took a long two minutes out thinking, then he summoned the sleepy Mrs. Blossom, the landlady. He had lived at the Venetian Apartments a long time. He soon arranged for Aileen and Thelma, if and when Thelma returned, to be transferred immediately to another apartment on the second floor. Their names to be omitted from the vestibule list for the present.

"You always were the devil, Jim O'Hara," Mrs. Blossom smiled. "But I never thought you would go so far as to adopt two redheads all at the same time."

Aileen consented to the move, saying she would keep watch for the return of Thelma and having O'Hara's promise that he would be back in a short time.

Some fifteen minutes later, O'Hara's battered sedan stopped alongside a stretch of vacant lots bordering the Tamiana Trail.

"Isn't Gent Barillo gonna get a big surprise when Legs Killian is finally picked up, alive and kicking, in an old trunk!" O'Hara grinned. "Especially seeing that I'm leaving his rod, fully loaded, in the trunk with him."

CHAPTER IV

Crafty Mr. Barker

O, THELMA has not returned," spoke the throaty voice of the redheaded Aileen. Tears were not far behind her throat now. "O'Hara, what am I going to do? This is very bad."

"I know exactly what we're going to do," said O'Hara. "I'll have Mrs. Blossom keep an eye out for Thelma if she comes back. We're going for a little ride over the Venetian Causeway to a nice big house up on Hibiscus Creek. That happens to be the domicile of Arnold Barker, one-time big-shot lawyer. Today, a shyster scraping together any business, clean or dirty, that comes his way."

"Why, O'Hara!" exclaimed Aileen. "He was my father's counsellor for many years."

"You heard me say he was a one-time big-shot lawyer," said O'Hara dryly.

"I . . . I don't think . . . there would be any pix for me, would there?" stuttered Chubby Merkle.

"Might not be any pix," snapped O'Hara, "but as long as I've got your fat mouth right close to me, I know who you're talking to, and about what."

Still chuckling over what Gent Barillo would think and say when Legs Killian would be rescued from that old trunk in that vacant lot, O'Hara pushed the sedan back downtown. He got on Flagler Street, turned off on Biscayne Boulevard and crossed over the toll-charge Venetian Causeway.

It was not quite graying dawn, as he followed the winding roads along the so-called creeks that created numerous islands for millionaires' residences. He pulled in from a straight boulevard to the monstrous pile of stucco where Lawyer Barker still managed to live in splendor in spite of his greatly lowered rating as an attorney-at-law.

Arnold Barker was not a prepossessing figure; he was partly bald, with a hooked nose, a tight mouth and black eyes that dug into O'Hara. Barker very grumpily wanted to know the occasion for a call at this ungodly hour. Then the middle-aged shyster saw Aileen Court for the first time. In O'Hara's keen judgment, there was more than surprise at the mere fact of Aileen's presence here, after O'Hara had introduced them. It was as if Lawyer Barker were questioning how she could be here at all.

From that moment, Lawyer Barker exuded a forced geniality.

"Sit down, my dear, sit down," he invited Aileen. "I'll mix up some drinks," waving away a sleepy, half-clad butler.

O'Hara caught Aileen's bluish-green eyes studying him. They created a sensation along his spine such as the hardboiled police reporter had never known. Aussie girls who went around beating up armed gunnies with bush whips hardly fitted into romance. Yet, O'Hara wondered if Aileen were not some-

thing of the type he needed to fit into his life. He shook off the feeling.

It seemed to him that the hook-nosed Lawyer Barker was gone for some considerable time for the mere mixing of drinks. He wondered why the sleepy, gray-haired butler had not been sent for the drinks.

The butler was carrying the tray when Barker returned to the living room.

"Now, let's have it!" said Barker, apparently having loosened his spirit with some Scotch while he was absent. He said to Aileen: "After that muss in my office, I considered it best to keep your address out of the hands of the police. In fact, I went so far as to file a complaint just to keep the cops from getting ideas."

O'HARA was too old a hand to have the blinkers pulled over his eyes.

"Let's begin at the beginning, Barker," he said curtly. "What's become of Nathaniel Court?"

"I wish I knew," Barker sighed heavily. "It's been almost two months since I saw him. He said then that he expected his neices from Australia, although he would try to prevent them from coming to America."

"Why?" snapped O'Hara.

"That, I wouldn't know," said Barker. "I had been given to understand by the father of these girls that he had entrusted two millions in diamonds to their Uncle Nathaniel to be delivered intact when the youngest, Thelma would reach eighteen."

"Where are those diamonds?" asked O'Hara.

"That is a point upon which Nathaniel Court has been adamant. Beyond letting me know that they are in a private steel vault and probably not in a bank, he has told nothing."

O'Hara's brain worked in the usual deductive grease. He remarked quietly, cynically: "And not even Gent Barillo can get the secret out of him."

"What in hell do you mean by that?" raged Barker. "Are you intimating—?"

"I'm not intimating," drawled O'Hara. "I'm just saying that Gent Barillo doesn't play for peanuts, and Gent Barillo has somehow obtained the address of the Court sisters that all the regular police force of Miami has failed to produce."

Barker arose. "I find no reason to discuss this with you further, O'Hara," he said harshly. "On the other hand, I'll be pleased to take the whole matter up, at any time, with Aileen or Thelma Court. Good night, sir."

Aileen started to speak but O'Hara put his hand on her arm.

"When you've been given the brush-off," he said, "sometimes it's wiser to let yourself be brushed. Let's go."

Barker seemed genial again as he accompanied them to the door.

Chubby Merkle had been left waiting in the car. As usual, he was growling. "There is too much traffic along the creeks, for this hour in the morning," he complained. "I've seen three cars go by. Mebbe I dreamed it, but the men in all three seemed to be giving this old jalopy the hard once-over."

O'Hara laughed. "Demon cameramen should not have imagination," he grunted. "We're heading for the nearest phone. I want to call the Venetian and see if your sister has returned, Aileen."

There it was again, her firm hand closed on his arm. O'Hara felt as if a hot iron had been run down along his spine. He never would have believed he would fall for a girl tough enough to whip a gun out of a mobster's hand and then give him the works. But that was the way it seemed to be. It was worse when he glanced at Aileen and she smiled at him.

They found a phone at a filling station before leaving the millionaires' islands.

"Yes, O'Hara," said the voice of Mrs. Blossom. "Sure and the other redhead has come back. Also, she has brought company. She is entertaining a truck driver. And that ain't all, O'Hara. He brought along his truck, which is all loaded and should be well on its way north by this time. I tell you, O'Hara, them redheads are the devil."

That was all O'Hara could get from the usually loquacious Mrs. Blossom. He returned to the car and told Aileen.

"Let's hurry, O'Hara," urged Aileen breathlessly.

O'Hara swung his old sedan away from

the filling station and into the middle of the graveled driveway. A heavy black car, bearing down upon them, was hitting at least seventy. O'Hara twisted the wheel desperately. Seeing that a collision appeared inevitable, he failed to clear the other car. His old sedan was much lighter and it was lifted by the heavy bumper of the speeding car.

For the space of ten seconds, O'Hara was conscious only of turning over and over. Then he knew the water pouring through the doors was that of dredged-out Indian Creek.

O'Hara pulled Aileen through a door that just cleared the surface of the creek at the shore. Chubby Merkle was climbing out, pulling his camera and swearing.

The speeding car, which O'Hara had no doubt was meant to be a murder car, had not waited. O'Hara got himself and his soaked companions back to the filling station where the attendant gawked at them.

No, he had no time to get the license of the speeding car. All he had seen and heard was the collision. O'Hara loosened up with about all the bills he had in his pocket. It was enough to hire the coupe the filling-station man used to travel to work.

"We've got to get to Thelma," pleaded Aileen.

O'Hara examined his .38 and discovered it hadn't been water-damaged.

"I'm sure Thelma will be okay for the time," he said. "We're returning to pay a surprise call upon Lawyer Barker. If I'm not mistaken, he had a hand in what has just happened."

Crowded into the small coupe, they passed a maroon sedan coming from the direction of the Barker residence. At the moment, O'Hara was thankful for the change to the coupe. He had a hunch that the maroon sedan would have stopped if they had been identified.

O'HARA punched the buzzer at Lawyer Barker's big house. The five or six times he punched it brought no results. A queer look came over his face.

"It doesn't pay to play with fire," he observed to no one in particular.

He tried the big door and the latch had not been closed. When he went in and turned toward the living room, he held out an arm and told Aileen to stay back. He could hear Chubby Merkle's teeth chattering. He knew that Chubby had the same sensation that he had encountered. The hard-boiled police reporter had experienced it all too often. That sweetish smell in the air could be but one thing. That was human blood.

The one-time big-shot Arnold Barker, more recently shyster mouthpiece for racketeers, lay in front of the fireplace. There was ample reason for the scent of human blood.

Most of Arnold Barker's blood had been drained from two deep knife wounds in his throat. There might have been a possible witness if it had not been that the aged butler lay across the chair. The back of his skull had been crushed.

"Now I know," O'Hara said softly to himself. "Barker, the shyster, is no longer useful to Gent Barillo. I should call Chief Watkins, but there's no sense in stirring up the law until discovery of the crime comes about in due course."

He came out to Aileen and Chubby Merkle, shaking his head.

"Lawyer Barker will be of no further use in finding your uncle, Aileen," he said gently. "I think we have business with a truck driver. Some things are beginning to add up. Hundreds of trucks are hauling the winter produce out of the Everglades. That racket would be peanuts for Gent Barillo, but—many mysterious things happen in the heart of the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamps."

CHAPTER V

A Living Ghost

HIS truck driver had the drooping jowls of a bulldog and less than the intelligence of a smart monkey in his eyes. He bore the remarkable name of Bowser. He was gloomily happy.

While the Aussie sisters were in each other's arms, O'Hara studied the heavy-featured Bowser. The abducted truck driver had

something more than respect for his red-headed abductor.

Thelma's nose was straight and she lacked freckles. Her skin was darker than Aileen's, more in harmony with her coppery hair. Bowser's truck was parked in front of the Venetian Apartments and was piled high with crated lettuce from the truck farms far back in the Everglades.

"Two men grabbed me and put me into a car when I came out of the cinema," explained Thelma. "I was blindfolded and gagged. The car went many miles. I could hear frogs and loons and other swamp birds. I guessed we were driving west from Miami."

"How come you're here?" asked O'Hara.

"Oh, that," said Thelma. "I was put into a small hut with but one guard. I took his gun away from him and hit him over the head. Then I saw Bowser starting out with his truck. I climbed over the lettuce crates and held my gun against Bowser's neck. So he brought me here."

Thelma told her simple story with a little smile, but then her brown eyes clouded.

"I think I've found Uncle Nathaniel," she told Aileen. "An old man with a white beard was taken into a canoe. He was crying out, 'I can't stand another night out there.' I heard one man tell the old man he would soon have company and then he would be glad to talk. That was all before the canoe disappeared."

This was clicking with what O'Hara already had surmised. He had guessed that Uncle Nathaniel Court was being held by the Gent Barillo mob. The abduction had been engineered by the dead Attorney Barker.

"With two millions in ice at stake and the girl's uncle holding the secret of the diamonds, why should Gent Barillo take a chance on having to split with Barker?" muttered O'Hara. "But there's more to it than the diamonds."

O'Hara turned upon Bowser.

"All the truckers coming out of the 'glades have been paying off to Gent Barillo, haven't they?" demanded O'Hara.

Bowser stuttered a denial of knowing anything about it. O'Hara slapped the big trucker to the floor. When he got up, he slapped him down again.

"You're all through anyway when they find your truck," asserted O'Hara. "You might as well come clean."

"We've been paying five dollars a week to different fellows," admitted Bowser sullenly. "Now will you let me go?"

"No, O'Hara," put in Thelma suddenly. "I've heard about these American rackets, but there's more than that. There's more than lettuce on that truck. I heard a slickly dressed man telling some of the others to 'be sure the stuff has heads of lettuce packed around it in the inside crates.'"

A trucking-protection racket. A kidnaping in a play for two millions in diamonds. Now the suggestion that Gent Barillo was working the Miami and northbound trucks for smuggling.

Gent Barillo appeared to have done himself well after the closing of the race tracks.

O'Hara tried to guess what might be smuggled in such quantity as to be hidden in the trucks.

IT was well after daylight now. A boy on a bicycle rode along crying out an extra of the morning *Trib*. O'Hara sent Chubby out to buy a copy.

Several things had been busted wide open. First, the bodies of Attorney Barker and his butler had been found by a neighborhood patrolman.

Second, one Legs Killian, identified as "one of Gent Barillo's boys," had been discovered at daylight. The gunsel had been sitting on a bench in Bayfront Park. A slug had gone into one ear and out of the other.

O'Hara was tired, but there was no time to lose. Thelma's description of the gray-haired prisoner in the 'glades made it seem certain that Nathaniel Court had been a prisoner and tortured for many days, perhaps weeks.

Attorney Barker had lied though when he had said he had not heard from Nathaniel Court for two months.

"I don't care about the diamonds," cried out Aileen. "If only we can save Uncle Nathaniel."

"I'm having a look-see inside that truckload of lettuce," announced O'Hara. "Chubby, you stay here and help keep an eye on Bowser."

Thelma laughed shortly. "That's all right, but Bowser likes me too much to want to run away. Don't you, Bowser?"

"Uh-huh," grunted the droop-jowled driver.

His dull eyes held all the devotion of an overgrown Newfoundland puppy.

O'Hara didn't mind Aileen's trailing him out to examine the truck. Because the Aussie girl caught his hand and held it in a warm clasp. He was swearing inside, thinking of her being the heiress to millions in diamonds. O'Hara was wishing he had never met the Aussie sisters.

They reached the grilled entrance of the Venetian Apartments which stood out alone in a wide, unbuilt block. O'Hara swore and made a jump forward.

The loaded truck was starting to move away. O'Hara could not see the driver, being on the wrong side. But he cleared his .38 and made a run for it. He almost missed Aileen keeping pace easily beside him.

Apparently there was no witnesses to the departure of the loaded truck or the pursuit of O'Hara and Aileen. The big truck picked up speed slowly. O'Hara believed he could intercept it or at least get a crack at the driver when a turn had to be made into the Gateway Boulevard leading to the Tamiami Trail.

That was a big mistake. O'Hara had seen no sign of human life as he raced with Aileen to catch the truck at the corner turn. The truck appeared to stall, stopped abruptly near a long stretch of vacant lots.

O'Hara saw the black and the maroon sedans too late. They were parked around the corner. And four tough hoods were bobbing up from the protection of wild cactus and cabbage palms.

Two of the hoods carried choppers. Two depended upon their rods.

There was a fifth fellow who seemed to be armed with only a toothpick. O'Hara had seen the sartorially elegant Gent Barillo too often to mistake the racketeer. Barillo came up facing Aileen and O'Hara.

"Too bad for you you didn't drown in Indian Creek," said Barillo softly. "So you had to stick your newsy nose into this, O'Hara. You'll be a long time under when the story is printed, if it ever is. You an' the redhead get into the black sedan."

Even then O'Hara believed the spirited Aussie girl would have made a fight against overwhelming odds. Then O'Hara ceased to believe anything at all. Gun metal crashed across the back of his skull.

O'HARA was seated alongside the red-headed Aussie girl when his senses came back. He was completely taped, gagged, and blinded. He knew Aileen was there only by the soft pressure of her shoulder.

O'Hara's intimate knowledge of the Everglades informed him their car must have come some distance along the Tamiami Trail, the only direct, paved highway be-

tween Miami and the Gulf Coast. He knew when the car turned into slower and bumpier going that it was following one of the countless sand-rut roads penetrating the heart of the 'glades and Big Cypress Swamp.

O'Hara could hear Barillo, in the seat ahead, conversing in a low tone. The car's radio was blasting. A news bulletin came suddenly and it had the impact of an electric shock:

"SPECIAL BULLETIN:—*Thelma Court, one of the Australian girls wanted for several days by the police for wrecking the office of the murdered Attorney Barker, has been picked up in Coral Gables. The girl was in the company of a truck driver who is alleged to have been connected with the Gent Barillo mob. Thelma Court is being held in connection with the Barker murder, on the report of a filling-station attendant that a red-headed girl and two men hired a car from him which has not been returned. The attendant stated that the red-headed girl and the men spoke of going to Attorney Barker's residence. The other sister and James O'Hara, newspaper police reporter, are on the police pickup list.*"

O'Hara could feel the convulsive straining of Aileen's soft body alongside him. Barillo swore heavily and turned off the radio.

"That ain't helping you two one damn' bit," he growled over his shoulder.

CHAPTER VI

An Old Man's Nerve

THE tape was torn painfully from their eyes and lips when the car finally came to a jolting halt. Gent Barillo's face was oily and his black eyes mirrored his enjoyment.

"What you're seein', O'Hara, won't be doin' you a damn' bit of good unless you kick in and be reasonable. Then what you're seein' won't be here to make you a story anyway."

O'Hara saw a small but complete warehouse and wharf set upon a deep black channel. He could tell from the oyster shells on the piling and the tide-run marks that this channel was in Big Cypress Swamp. Also it had to be close to the Gulf of Mexico. As he looked a loaded vegetable truck was pulled up alongside the small warehouse. Four or five small crates were brought out of the warehouse and shoved to the inside of the crated vegetables.

Barillo snapped out an order: "Let's get this started and we'll see what the old man will do when he finds his pretty red-headed niece on the platform of the sun shack."

O'Hara might have said several things but he kept his teeth clicked shut. Although her mouth and eyebrows were reddened where the tape had been torn off, Aileen smiled at him.

"I think we'll soon find Uncle Nathaniel," she half-whispered.

Their legs had not been bound and they

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were shoved toward the flat-bottomed boat. Two men picked up long poles, then sent the boat across the black channel into what appeared to be an endless space of more black water. O'Hara shuddered in spite of himself.

While the swamp here became more shallow and the knees of an occasional cypress thrust down into the black water, O'Hara knew that all the space they were covering was filled with deadly sink holes and quicksands.

O'Hara didn't miss either the spots of gaping white that looked like open mouths. They contained the deadly fangs of the one snake more deadly than the rattlers, the cotton-mouthed water moccasin.

It seemed to O'Hara the boat had been poled nearly a mile and the course it took hid the warehouse and wharf from view. The light spring sun was already broiling O'Hara's face and hands. He knew Aileen must be suffering equally. But even this did not prepare him for the cruelty and torture that lay ahead, devised by the sadistic soul of Gent Barillo for the seeming purpose of compelling a helpless old man to reveal the secret of where he had hidden two millions in diamonds.

It was a sheet-iron shack that stood upon the tiny hummock entirely surrounded by a wide expanse of the deadly black water with its quicksands and its poisonous moccasins.

Not until Aileen and he were compelled to mount a small raised platform inside the sheet-iron shack did O'Hara realize to the full the torture that was ahead. It was only after the swearing captors tore the tape from their arms and freed them, keeping their guns upon them, that O'Hara realized what was to come.

O'Hara realized too that the emaciated body with only torn rags as a covering, and with a face swollen under a white beard to almost blackness, must be the Uncle Nathaniel of the two Aussie girls.

Their captors lost no time in leaving the shack. The shack was boiling to a temperature far above a hundred and which was filled with literally millions of mosquitoes and black gnats.

THE attack of the insects was immediate and vicious. O'Hara tried to protect Aileen's face and neck with his coat. It was now late afternoon. Finally the coat had to serve to keep the myriad of mosquitoes and gnats off both Aileen and O'Hara as much as possible.

The emaciated old man had pulled an old gunnysack about his face. He seemed in a delirium and his eyes were swollen almost shut. Uncle Nathaniel, however, was of saner mind than he seemed, though his thickened lips only whispered:

"I'll never tell . . . Barker will never find . . . diamonds are where nobody . . . "

Uncle Nathaniel laughed croakingly, deliriously O'Hara agreed that Attorney Barker would never find the diamonds.

"Full moon—" whispered Uncle Nathaniel. "Water comes . . . fish . . . 'gators crawl in. Aileen, I know that is you. Diamonds gone . . . have few thousands . . . you and Thelma . . . "

O'Hara quieted the old, apparently dying man and he slept.

O'Hara saw the sheet-iron door had not been locked. The black water and the oozy quicksands provided prison enough. O'Hara studied the tide marks that appeared inside the shack.

The four-foot platform was necessary. High tide, now already in flood, would come into the shack around the platform. O'Hara looked out through the doorway.

Hundreds of fish, Gulf fish—red snappers, kingfish, tuna—were floating toward the shack on the tide.

"I have the answer to Barillo's smuggling game," said O'Hara. "Commercial fishing boats are being passed by the Coast Guard. Gent Barillo isn't in the fish business. The fish are being dumped from boats coming to his wharf. That means something much more valuable has been hidden under the iced fish."

"Do you think this Barillo wishes us to die out here?" asked Aileen.

"No," stated O'Hara. "Barillo must realize that Uncle Nathaniel hasn't many hours to live. He may leave us here part of the night as a final play upon your uncle's

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nerves, hoping he'll break. I don't believe he ever will."

"And then—?" Aileen's voice was anxious.

The girl's face and hands were swollen from insect bites. But she still tried to smile.

O'Hara had suddenly made up his mind.

"There'll be no *and then,* Aileen," he said. "High tide will give me three or four feet of water over the quicksand ooze. I can swim out by resting some on cypress roots. We were brought no more than a mile."

"Then what will you do, O'Hara?" asked Aileen.

"Barillo's few men will be busy, off-guard. There are Tommy-guns. I'll need only one. Then I'll be coming back for you and Uncle Nathaniel."

"But how will you find the direction of Barillo's wharf?"

It was growing dark, suddenly as always over the 'glades. A faint glowing light appeared above the trees in the distance.

"There it is," said O'Hara. "Barillo is rushing to unload a boat. A fire has been built for light to load a truck. That'll be my pilot light. I can make it."

O'Hara was staring at the bodies of fish floating in on the tide. The water was in a turmoil out there. Many fish were disappearing.

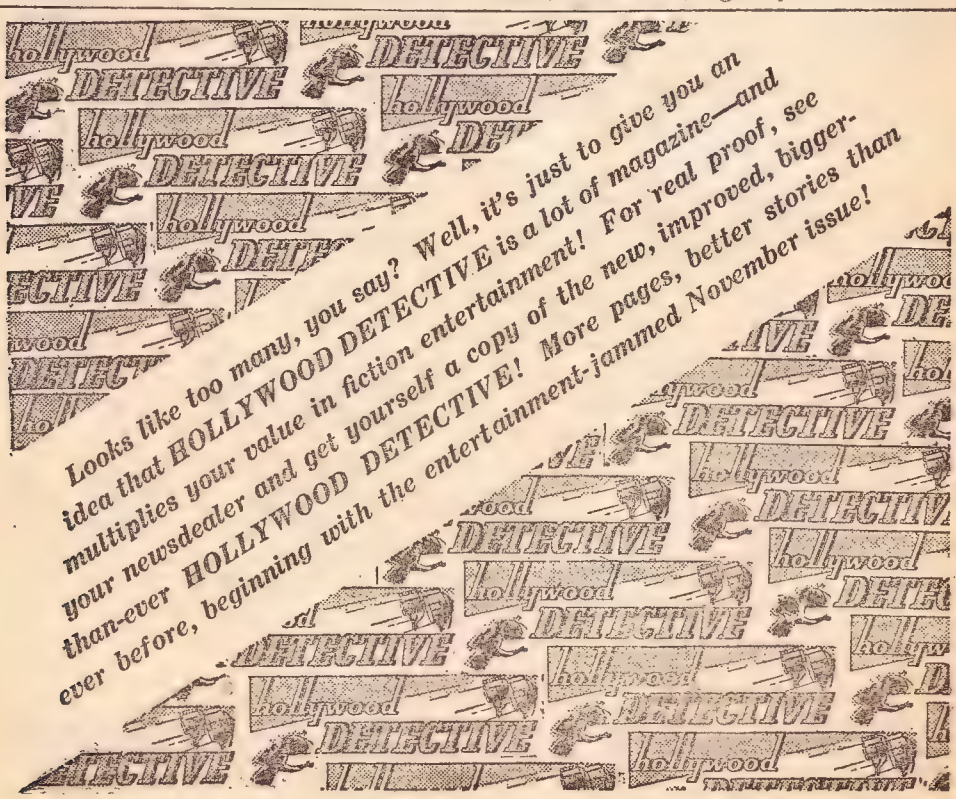
O'Hara had forgotten about the 'gators.

"Yes, O'Hara, we can make it!" exclaimed Aileen suddenly. "It's dark enough to start."

"What do you mean, *we* can make it?" growled O'Hara. "It's *my* job. Once the feet are put down into the oozy bottom to rest, the quicksand will take you. I'm a good swimmer and I'll take breathers on cypress roots."

He looked at Aileen, swore and turned his head quickly away. The amazing Aussie redhead already had her dress stripped over her head. She was right down to essentials for swimming.

"Thelma and I hold the mile swimming record at home," Aileen smiled. "If you get tired, O'Hara, I'll give you a hand."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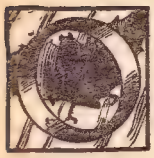
CHAPTER VII

Tommy-Gun Talk



'HARA slipped into the warm, brackish water with Aileen close beside him.

"I forgot about the 'gators," he muttered.

"Alligators never attack humans in my natural history," said Aileen. "They eat fish, eggs and small animals. Unlike the crocs—"

"Is there anything you Aussie girls haven't learned?" muttered O'Hara.

"Not much," admitted Aillen casually. "Except one thing, and O'Hara, I think I'm taking lessons in that since meeting you."

Her small hand touched his shoulder, then she was slipping ahead with a gliding crawl stroke that seemed to mark her as tireless.

Although O'Hara knew 'gators were not dangerous to humans, the stir in the water about them sent little bugs crawling along his spine.

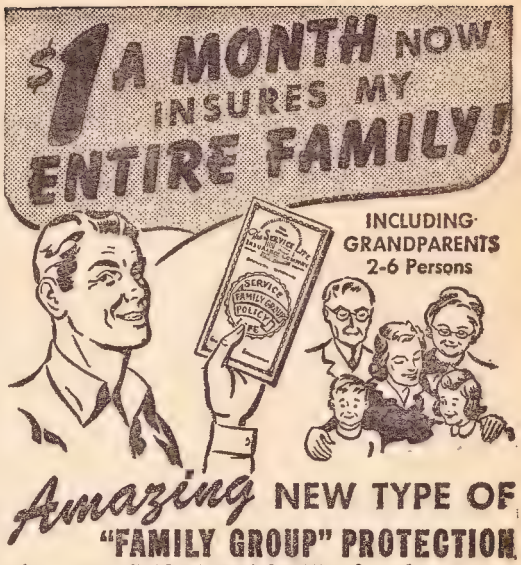
Porpoises, as big as cows, had followed schools of mullet into the Big Cypress Swamp. Combined with the 'gators they kept the water churning. Phosporescent light played over the water.

O'Hara could be thankful for this. Otherwise their own swimming might have been marked later or if Barillo had decided to send out a boat. When they reached a jutting cypress knee, O'Hara was compelled to pull himself up for a rest.

Aileen stayed partly in the water, her white legs moving slowly.

Suddenly the rustle and hissing of a deadly moccasin came from the big cypress knee on the side nearest Aileen. The reptile's head was within inches of Aileen's face.

O'Hara was chilled, but he went into action. He could see only the snow-white mouth of the snake in the moonlight. O'Hara hurled himself across Aileen's body. His stomach shrank, but his hands snatched directly at the white, venomous mouth. His sudden movement and considerable luck carried the four-foot moccasin with him on into the water.



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O'Hara expected every instant to feel the deadly fangs. Yet he clutched at every available part of the writhing snake. He was crushing the moccasin's triangular head upon the cypress root before he fully realized that he had escaped being bitten.

The Aussie redhead was not one to bubble over.

"You'll do in a pinch or for a lifetime," she remarked quietly.

Which was sufficient to drive the shaking reaction from O'Hara and give strength to his almost paralyzed muscles.

THE flat boat, with two men poling, stood out, a magnified, enormous shadow. O'Hara touched Aileen and whispered:

"Stay back. I'll have those two muggs in the water before they know what hit them. I'll get at least one rod."

"You keep forgetting me," replied Aileen. "Suppose you take the mugg, as you call him, at one end of the boat, and I'll work on the other one. It will be easier if their legs are suddenly snatched from under them."

The two disgruntled muggs were cursing over the job of poling the flat boat over the shoal black water. The boat carried an outboard motor for deeper channels. It was unsafe to use this motor where the water shoaled and was filled with cypress roots and snags. Once jammed with the tide running out, the boat might remain there for many hours.

As O'Hara reluctantly consented, Aileen, whom he had to admit was a better swimmer than he, glided silently toward one end of the boat. O'Hara selected the chunky mobster poling at the stern. He noticed the outboard motor. He didn't realize then how much that motor was to mean within the next hour.

A sibilant hiss came from Aileen. Because 'gators still stirred the water and thumped it loudly with their tails as they fought over the floating fish, the noiseless approach of Aileen and O'Hara was unnoticed.

Thus it came about that two unsuspecting muggs uttered combined yells. They must have believed that a pair of 'gators had reached into the boat and closed upon their legs. O'Hara vaguely saw the mugg seized by Aileen go toppling overboard, his pole clattering to the bottom of the boat.

O'Hara pulled a fast one. He locked his arms around the legs of the mobster at the stern pole. He jerked them from under him, throwing him into the boat on his face. Be-

"Hey, what is this—a pinch?"

cause the mugg was half-stunned, O'Hara was into the boat and handing him solid punches on the back of his neck before the mugg recovered. He retrieved an automatic from the man's shoulder holster and just to make sure, he clunked him on the back of the skull with the gun barrel.

He looked and Aileen was pulling herself into the bow of the boat.

"I couldn't help it, O'Hara," she half-apologized. "That fellow hit his head on the side of the boat and went under. He didn't come up so I missed getting his gun."

By this time O'Hara saw that the boat was but a couple of hundred yards off the Barillo wharf. The fire on shore outlined a small fishing schooner and a truck being loaded. Half a dozen figures were moving between the fishing boat across the wharf to the truck.

O'Hara saw Gent Barillo' slick well-garbed figure standing fully in the light of the fire. None of the men seemed to be especially on guard, but one mugg held a light Tommy-gun over his left arm. It caused O'Hara to have a suspicion that one of the three fishermen he saw aboard the boat might not be in thorough agreement with the smuggling racket.

The tide, having reached its flood, was setting out strongly. Drainage from the miles of flat black water was flowing in the deeper boat channel that led to the Gulf.

O'Hara half-whispered to Aileen: "The tide's swinging along the shore directly into that old wooden wharf and the boat. Pole in close to shore. I've an idea we're going swimming again."

They had but the one gun that had been seized by O'Hara. Because of the firelight brilliance, the boat was still in deep darkness.

"Slip into the water, Aileen," directed O'Hara. "We'll make it ashore here. I'll dump this sleeping mugg close to shore."

He made sure the automatic clip was filled with its quota of ten slugs. Half a minute later he had emptied all the gasoline from the outboard motor tank by turning it up and releasing the cap. The extra two-gallon can with the precious priority fuel was next poured along the bottom of the wooden boat.

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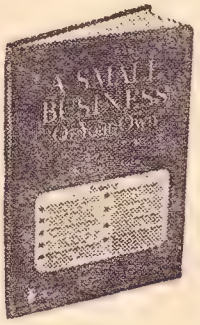

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When they were in the water, O'Hara said ruefully: "This is the chance we have to take." He put the automatic close over the gas and triggered it once. There was a flash of flame.

The tide ran faster as they neared the channel and swung the flaming flat boat directly into the flimsy wooden wharf and the fishing schooner. The crack of that shot had started Barillo and the half-dozen men with him. They were rushing onto the wharf watching the oncoming boat.

At this moment O'Hara's feet touched solid coral. Aileen and he climbed out. The boat was within a few yards of the wharf. Barillo's men with drawn guns were watching the boat, looking behind it into the darkness. The direction of that one shot had been indefinite.

Aileen and O'Hara were within thirty or forty yards of the wharf and warehouse but in the darkness on the other side of the fire. A man ran out with a long pole evidently intending to fend off the flaming boat.

O'Hara snapped a carefully aimed slug. The man with the pole crumpled down with a leg shattered. O'Hara dropped, pulling Aileen down. Instantly the guns of Barillo's men were blazing. Slugs whined into the darkness. O'Hara had Aileen flattened behind a slight hummock.

Gent Barillo was the first man to dive for cover. He didn't quite make it. Once more O'Hara used a carefully aimed slug. He was thankful now for the long practice he had had on the police target range. He was convinced he had shattered Barillo's knee as the racketeer rolled and screamed.

There was a slight crash. Gas-fed flames licked up over the flimsy wooden wharf. It caught and the blaze spread. O'Hara counted four men darting out of the warehouse which the flames were swiftly approaching. There was a grinding noise of a motor starting. A loaded vegetable truck came into full view in the firelight scarcely twenty yards away. O'Hara wasted two slugs before a front tire of the truck blew out with an explosion louder than that of the guns.

"Stay here, Aileen," grunted O'Hara.

He was weaving through the darkness. Barillo's boys were piling off the truck. One carried a Tommy-gun. O'Hara was suddenly so close upon them that he might have been mistaken for one of their own number in the darkness. The man with the Tommy-gun found out his mistake too late. O'Hara's automatic cracked across the back of his skull.

In O'Hara's mind was a picture of a dying skeleton that had been a man, out there in an iron shack where he had undergone weeks of torture. . . .

Only Barillo himself and one of the fishermen aboard the schooner were alive when the Tommy-gun stopped rattling in O'Hara's hands.

O'Hara's first move was to strip the clothes from one of the mobsters. He handed them to Aileen in the darkness. Gent Barillo was pleading, cursing, promising big dough. O'Hara simply wore a hard grin. He found that the surviving fisherman was friendly.

From the ice hold of the fishing boat and from the burning warehouse they brought a dozen small, tightly wired bales.

"It was a tight little racket," said O'Hara to Aileen. "There's still a boat here. We must go back for your uncle."

OWL O'HARA pointed out to the country and city law the bales of deadly marijuana that had been brought in by fishing boats and smuggled into Miami and northward in the vegetable trucks. "Only the greediness, first of that shyster Barker and then of Barillo who had him murdered, brought us to this racket that pays off big, both in money and the lives of boys and girls."

"One of these days you'll get too far ahead of the department," growled Chief Watkins from Miami, "and when you do—"

O'Hara grinned at him. The police doctor said Uncle Nathaniel had some chance for life and that his mind was already clearing. Thelma had been brought out in a police car and joined her sister Aileen. Bowser, the truck driver, had been released. Chubby Merkle had returned the filling-

station car by remote control. He had hired a boy to take it back.

O'Hara looked at Aileen. The Aussie redhead looked just as beautiful in the mobster's rough clothes as she had in a dress.

"Too bad," he muttered, "you girls have to have millions in diamonds."

"But they haven't millions in diamonds," came the thin voice of Uncle Nathaniel. "That is what I've been trying to tell. The diamonds were in a steel safe on my private yacht. The insurance lapsed because of war risk. Before it could be renewed, the yacht was apparently sabotaged and sank in the deep water off the Miami Beach channel.

"There are no diamonds. There will be only a few thousands of my own money for Aileen and Thelma."

O'Hara drew in his breath sharply. Aileen and Thelma were smiling at each other.

"Now," said Thelma. "We can get us a job in an American war plant like we wanted to do. Possibly my boy friend in Melbourne will now listen to sense when he finds out we're no longer heiresses to a diamond fortune."

Aileen's blue-green eyes turned toward O'Hara.

"I wonder," she said quietly, "if I could find an American boy friend who would also listen to sense."

O'Hara grinned broadly. "You're sure enough through looking," he said and took her in his arms.

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THE WORM HAS FANGS

(*Continued from page* 13)

end, if they wanted to get rid of their guilt by the hyp method, they would have to come to Doc. And they would! Good old Doc! They would have no shame in telling *him* those horrible things! A man who had been in prison wouldn't scorn them for their frailties!

You bet he wouldn't!

My hands were shaking like leaves. This was it. This was what I wanted. This would take care of Doc. Here was the reward of a brand-new car, right in my lap. Tomorrow Doc would be pretty badly wanted, at the very least. They didn't want an arrest from me—they wanted evidence. With what I had there, we could pick Doc up any time. He had gone too far. This was his last wallop, his Sunday punch, the end product of a brilliant criminal brain that had exhausted every other avenue of criminality for which his medical mind fitted him. This was it.

"Got you right where I want you, Doc!" I chortled, gripping the box in my arm.

Scorning my pyramid of chairs, I dropped down to the floor with a kind of a reckless grunt and looked straight into the eyes of "Doctor" Pan Waldemar himself.

"Lieutenant Les James, isn't it?" he said. "I thought it would be you. Breaking and entering. That's exactly your brainless, clumsy style. Put down the box."

"No," I said.

"*Put down the box!*" he repeated, without changing the deadly, precise, foreign voice that was one of his trademarks.

"No," I said, choking a little. I had the way to a new car under my arm, and I knew a police trick or two. If I put down the box, he would shoot me. Oh, sure—he had a gun! Why do you think I hadn't slugged him already? "No," I said. "I've got a warrant."

He let that one pass. He knew better. He had come in the back way, too, and he knew that when a cop comes in with a warrant he kicks his way in.

He was older, and prison had acted like sea-water on flax on him, rubbing away the last vestiges of soft, ordinary humanness and leaving only the tough fibers of the purest, meanest, strongest, coldest, bravest, surest, highest and most vicious character I have ever met. A line came back to me—*nuttier than a pet coon.* That was Doc, all right. I don't know when he crossed the line—maybe when he was born, only I did not recognize it last time I saw him—but he was not able to think as I did any longer.

PRISON had not changed him. It had merely refined the viciousness in him. His haughty Prussian face was bonier, more commanding, under the whiter hair. His saber scar, with its little stitch-puckers, looked like microscopic barbed wire on his pallid jaw. His hands—huge, powerful, nerveless surgeon's hands—were quite steady. His eyes were not mad. They were angry, but I get that kind of a look when a fly lights on me.

He had performed an operation on a fellow-convict, I remembered, curing him of "hopeless" stomach-ulcer perforations by severing the Vagus nerves, having read of the technique in a newspaper in the prison library. It was a clandestine operation, and the story did not come out until the patient started hollering for beans again, after putting on twenty pounds. Mad? Would you call that kind of a man an ordinary nut? Not thirty doctors in the country had performed that revolutionary surgery then. And Doc did it with kitchen tools, using illuminating gas from the prison cook-stove for an anesthetic. Ask your own doc about that Vagus trick.

He jabbed the gun at me to muffle its report in my own clothing. I took a step backward, still holding the box, wishing bitterly that I had followed the best hunch I ever had and had called Cap. The squad would have had the place inside out, by now. Doc was patient. He could afford to

be. He jabbed the gun at me again. I took another step backward and tried to knock his arm down with the box. He shook his head in an annoyed manner. He had plenty of time to get me into position for a muffled shot. Why wake up Sunset Boulevard with it?

I hit at him again with the box and again he grabbed at it with his powerful left hand. But I had two hands, and I jerked it away from him.

Suddenly a car stopped in front, and a girl laughed, and a man's voice said something very dirty and very cheerful. They got out of the car and crossed the walk. A key rattled in the lock—next door. It was the fan-magazine correspondent. Evidently he had scored with a nice "gift" from Buckteeth. They went into the closet and I heard them through the thin wall, sorting empty bottles from full ones. I took a chance then, and met Doc's eyes. I had to. Those two were my only allies, and they had left their motor running.

"I'm going to yell in about a minute," I whispered.

"No, you're not," Doc said.

"Yes, I am."

"Yell, then."

He would have shot me, and I knew it, and he knew I knew it. His icy blue eyes lighted a little. It was like a physical blow in the forehead to me. *He* had the psychological edge, *he* had nothing to lose that he would not lose anyway if I won, *he* was in his own legally rented place of business, *he* was not breaking and entering.

"You want to talk about it, don't you?" he whispered. "You'd like to argue, wouldn't you? But in a moment they'll be gone, and then you're going to back up another step—aren't you?—and then another—and another—and when you reach the other wall you'll stand there. And that's all you can do, isn't it? And you're going to be so paralyzed with fear that you can't move, aren't you? *Because you can't help yourself?*"

The book said a hyp couldn't sway you with a lie. It had to be true, and the subject had to know it was true. This was true. I couldn't help myself. The corre-

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spondent and his blonde went silent a moment as they kissed. Then they went out, clinking bottles and yelling what-ho for Palm Springs. Doc jabbed the gun at me again.

I TUCKED the box under my arm so he would not see my hand shake, and let him ram the gun into my belly. I have a kind of a sergeant's pod and it took about half of the little gun. It wouldn't have made much of a pop. I didn't have to try to hold his eyes. We were both sweating like fools, with our eyes locked like the antlers of a pair of rutting bull moose. Truth and a yellow light, the book said.

"No, Doc," I said, remembering the chapter on hypnotist-resisting subjects, hoping I could sweat it out a minute or two longer—

"No, Doc, I'm not going to back up against the wall. I have already stopped—haven't I? And you've got the gun in my belly—haven't you? And you're not going to pull the trigger, are you?"

"Your Honor, he always grabbed our copy of SPEED DETECTIVE first!"

"You are going to back up," he whispered tensely, "and I am going to pull the trigger—after you put down the box!"

More sweat rolled out of me, rivering down my groins. We leaned at each other. We both started to whisper at once.

"You are an old man, Doc—"

"You are breaking and entering—"

"Prison is not so bad, Doc—"

"You are a guilty cop—the newspapers will crucify your dead body—"

"You are too old for it, Doc. Prison is better—"

"You are a guilty cop—you are trying to shake down an ex-con, the papers will say! Look at you sweat!"

"Prison is better, Doc," I whispered, swallowing my sweat and listening to the ringing in my ears, rather than his voice. "Prison is better. You liked prison, Doc. You were a great man in prison. You liked prison, Doc. It made you strong. You liked prison, Doc. It took all those strong bars to hold you. You liked prison, Doc. I am your friend. I will take you to prison, Doc. You liked it—remember?"

"Guilty, guilty!" he whispered. "The world hates—a guilty cop! Worse than anything in the world!"

"Sure, Doc," I said. "I'm your friend. I'm a guilty cop, Doc. The cops had to go crooked to get you, didn't they? But I'm your friend, Doc. You're a great man, Doc, and I'm your friend. I'm not a stupid cop, Doc—I'm a crooked one. I'm almost as bad as you. Worse, because I'm a cop. But I'm your friend, Doc."

Over and over and over, because some people were walking down the sidewalk outside, and I pulled in my gut a little and got it away from the gun, and he jabbed it at me again and things went slightly black for me, and I had to think hard of my diaphragm to keep it from wilting and sending my voice falsetto.

"They'll pity me," he said, "because you are a crooked cop, preying on a poor old man who has served his time."

"I'm your friend, Doc," I said, "and if you shoot me you'll never be sure of your-

self again. Because you're an old man, Doc, and prison was so good, Doc, and you walked the exercise yard with your arms folded, and you liked— *Give me that gun!"*

I threw the box into his face with one hand and took the gun with the other, and I brought my knee up between his legs and my forehead down on his nose, and with my whole body I pushed hard. Doc went over backwards and let me have the gun. I made sure of the precious box by feeling for it, because I had a new car there if I took care of it. Car? Nuts! Besides that I had a job as a studio cop as long as I lived, after I retired on pension two years from now. Without asking. I know those picture people.

I SLUGGED him, because on the way falling down he remembered prison wasn't so hot after all, but by then I had the gun. I lit on his chest and grabbed his big Prussian ears and began sloshing his head on the floor. He got me over the kidneys with his powerful hands and I screamed, but I kept on sloshing his head.

Pretty soon he let go of my kidneys. I stopped screaming and sloshed him again for luck. I felt of his heart. It was a tough old hunk of criminal mutton, and still ticking. I whacked the bight off the telephone card and trussed him up like a rolled roast. I went next door, kicked in the fan-magazine door, and called the wagon on their phone.

When I got back, Doc was awake. His nosebleed made him look more than ever like a malignant European nobleman—say, one about two jumps ahead of a revolutionary who was flourishing a sharp scythe. I took the book out of the case.

"This is anonymous, I notice," I said. "Come clean, now. Your work?"

He stared at me coldly. Then a glitter lighted his eyes.

"Of course," he said wearily, "but it is not a serious work. It is trash, a vulgar popularization I turned out years ago, for two specific purposes—one, to make money; and two, to condition stupid readers to hypnosis."

"It worked, then," I said, "because I'm

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going to make a lot of money. I bet I retire as a captain for this. And it conditioned *you,* didn't it? Didn't it, Doc?"

He rolled over. I went around to the other side and made it necessary for him to look at me.

"You faked the case histories, too, didn't you?" I said. "Even good old Case 97—the ex-con who confessed a murder, under the hypnotic suggestion that he *liked* the peace of prison. You remembered that one when I quoted it to you, didn't you? Didn't you, Doc?"

His harsh, arrogant, aristocratic face crumpled into lines and seams of shame and defeat, and he nodded. The worm had turned on him—his own worm, with a big mouthful of teeth, too. Because it was not I who hypnotized him. *He* did it himself, years ago, when he wrote the book!

He wept foolishly, brokenly, as we loaded him into the wagon.

"Well, what d'ya expect in a place that won't lay out a dime for an ashtray!"

ONE TRAIL TO MURDER

(*Continued from page 37*)

numbing rip of the slug smashing through bone into his vitals slapped a red haze over his eyes.

But the accelerated coupé had about a twenty yard run for a pick-up before it crashed head-on into the first oncoming truck. Joe Lake knew he put this over only because the woman killer had not expected he would act so quickly, deliberately throw away his own life.

And with the rending smash, the sudden explosion of flames, and the consciousness of the towering ten-tonner skidding and starting to topple on the smaller coupé, Joe Lake was sure this was it.

There was a second explosion, coming from the tank of the overturned truck that lay squarely across the road, blocking the second truck.

But Joe Lake's impression of that was of an explosion inside his own head that ended in merciful blackness.

THUS Joe Lake did not see the several hundred workers of the night shift who came pouring from the dehydrating plant. Nor did he see three men who jumped from the second truck and tried to reach the darkness beyond the spotlight beams of the factory.

Two of these were cut down by guards of the plant, and the third man lay unconscious where he had run head-on into Bumps McCarthy's camera swung by its straps.

Joe Lake awoke only to a consciousness of a man in white bending over him and producing hot agony in his side. Gradually the round, red face of Bumps swam into his vision.

"Joe? Joe! Lookit!"

Bumps was bending over him. Joe Lake was too amazed at being still alive to speak at once.

"Joe, you'll be okay," said Bumps. "The doctor says that slug should have hit your

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heart, but I guess you ain't got any. Joe, I didn't get to that bridge, an' they had me an' Siwash in the truck—the one behind that didn't burn—see—but I didn't get any pix an' the box is busted—"

Joe Lake tried to grin, but it hurt his side. He could see now a wavering line of white faces. The doctor said, "Take it easy, fellow. You've been talking, talking too much. Even when I thought you had drawn your final ticket, you kept on giving us a delirious story. So don't talk any more now—not until you've had a long sleep."

Joe Lake found his voice. It was weak.

"But you've gotta stop—stop all that poisoned powder—they put in some milk truck tanks—cats got at the milk—that killer had to keep the cats from being found poisoned—"

"Stop it, fellow," said the doctor. "You told all that. All about how mixing dehydrated milk powder with arsenic would hold up the shipments, turn half the populations of the Far East against the United States. For a fellow less than half an inch from going out for keeps, you talked a lot."

"They've already checked, Joe," supplied Bumps. "That woman who had her neck broken in the coupé when you hit the truck is not Miss Shaner. Her name is Shroener. And, Joe, it's too damn' bad, but one of the saboteurs they shot talked before he died. The wife of that Menlos was killed trying to escape, but he didn't know it, and he was forced to play along thinking he could save her. And—"

"Yeah—yeah," muttered Joe. "One murder had to lead to another—that Tully saw them in the car after he killed the truck driver he thought kicked his cats—they burned that truck after killing one of their own men who might have got cold feet—and Dirty Nell—"

"I'm putting you out of this world with a hypo, fellow," said the doctor. "You're not adding anything to what we know. If there's anything you want—"

"The story—" Joe Lake mumbled. "Tried to save it for our sheet—can't be printed now—no—have to keep it secret—Siwash—you there?"

Old Siwash had busted his gallus strap again. He was holding up his baggy pants to stay respectable.

"Yup, mister. I'm here. But I ain't stayin'. Nope. Got to git back or all them salmon me an' Tully had smokin' will be spoiled."

DEATH SHAKES THE DICE

(*Continued from page* 61)

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning the shadow mark on each sun dial falls across four-fifteen, not four even."

The ex-sailor's face darkened. "I don't get what you're driving at, Bud."

"I think you do," McKelvey said levelly. "You lied when you said your watch showed four o'clock. It was fifteen minutes past four. But by making me believe it was four o'clock, you had an airtight alibi. That's why you refused when Cynthia Lathrop tried to bribe you into saying you had me inside the grounds half an hour earlier. You pretended you were establishing *my* alibi—but in reality you were substantiating your own."

Slugsy started backing away. "Now wait."

"Wait, hell," McKelvey snapped. "It's just a moment's walk from the gate to the house when you take the short cut instead of the road. I think you deserted your post a little before four. You got into the house and killed Lathrop, then rushed back to the gate and were there on duty when I first arrived. I think your hands will show you fired a gun if they give you the parafin nitrate test. And I think that gun in your holster will match up to the bullet that killed Lathrop."

"Why, damn you—"

"And I think your name has its front

syllable sliced off. You call yourself Minotti. I think it's Dominotti. I think when Phil Lathrop hired you as a guard he was damned careless. He had just been acquitted of killing Mike Dominotti, the gambler. And he knew Dominotti's gunsels were after him for revenge. But he overlooked the possibility that a man named Slugsy Minotti might really be Slugsy Dominotti —one of Mike Dominotti's relatives. Maybe a brother, fresh out of the Navy."

Slugsy said: "Yeah, a brother," and pulled his .38 Colt. "Nobody better try to stop me," he said. "I'm going out."

"Don't try it," McKelvey said.

The big man smiled. "You're a smart little fella, Bud. Hand me them pictures."

"The negatives are down at the *Daily Blade*. These prints aren't worth anything even if you destroy them. I can make more."

"You're smarter than I thought," Slugsy said. "I'm still going out, though."

He was wrong. From the back of the room a county cop fired once. The bullet went into Slugsy's back, just as Slugsy's bullet had entered Phil Lathrop's back and found his heart. Slugsy Dominotti pitched forward on his face, just as Lathrop had done. His arms went out as if to break the force of his fall, but he was dead before he hit the floor.

Later, when the excitement had dwindled, Ronald Adair came to McKelvey. "You were magnificent," he said.

The same old theatrical dialogue, McKelvey thought. I guess he can't help it. That's the way he's built. Handsome, and high sounding, and windy as a Scotch bagpipe. "Thanks," McKelvey said. Then he added casually: "I suppose you'll marry Cynthia?"

"As soon as it's decent to do so, yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," McKelvey said, and turned away. He turned away because he wanted to hide the sardonic expression he couldn't keep out of his eyes. So Adair would marry Cynthia. That was all the revenge McKelvey wanted. Knowing Cynthia as he now knew her, he decided that it was vengeance enough for anybody.

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PRODUCTION FOR DEATH

(*Continued from page* 4)

from which a roped-off crowd gave Hicks an ovation, which both he and the marshal acknowledged with gracious bows.

AS THE party stood there, martial strains were heard, and around the corner came a fife, bugle, and drum corps, followed by a line of carriages, each one drawn by a team of black horses and driven by a coachman completely garbed in black. This parade halted before the steps and, while the trumpets and fifes rendered flourishes and the drums rolled, Marshal Rynders marched down the steps, successfully avoided tripping over his sword, and seated himself in the front seat of the leading carriage. Deputy Marshal Thompson sat beside him, and Hicks was put in the back seat between Sheriff Kelly and Father Duranquet. The number two carriage held the deputy sheriffs, each with his staff of office held sternly erect. The remainder of the vehicles were filled with politicians, gamblers, prize-fighters and their managers, doctors, and reporters.

The marshal gave a signal, the band began a dirge, and the procession moved slowly along through streets lined by cheering thousands to where the steamboat *Red Jacket* waited to take the party over to Bedloe's Island—which, as Federal government property, had been chosen as scene for the hanging.

At the dock, the steamboat was jammed with 1,500 invited guests and got under way at ten o'clock. Halfway across, Marshal Rynders realized that there was plenty of time—so he decided he might as well take his guests for a pleasure cruise up the Hudson.

They steamed slowly up the river as far as Hammond Street, where was anchored the passenger liner *Great Eastern,* just in from Europe on her maiden voyage. Marshal Rynders stood upon the bridge, a megaphone in one hand, his sword in the other, and as the *Red Jacket* circled the crowded packet, he shouted an explanation of the outing to the *Great Eastern* passengers, pointing with his sword to Hicks, who had been brought to the rail.

Half an hour later, the *Red Jacket* arrived at the Island. Between lines of Marines, the guests, led by the officials, marched down a broad gangplank to the pier, where was drawn up a detachment of infantry from Fort Hamilton to escort the doomed man to the gallows, while the Fort's band played a dirge.

The scaffold had been constructed about thirty feet from the water's edge. Hundreds of small craft, loaded with sightseers, packed the water for a hundred feet out. Beyond these were anchored a number of gaily decorated excursion steamers. At least 10,000 persons were on hand to witness the execution.

At eleven-thirty, Hicks climbed to the platform. Marshal Rynders and the other officials shook hands with him and, at eleven-forty-five, he dropped through the death trap.

The body dangled for thirty minutes and then was taken back to Manhattan on the *Red Jacket.* It was buried in Calvary Cemetery—but within a few days, the corpse was stolen by ghouls who sold it for a few dollars to medical students.

P. T. Barnum would doubtless have made a better offer.

THE AMERICAN DREYFUS CASE

BERLIN M. CARTER is called the American "Dreyfus" because of his prolonged struggle to clear his name. He was born in Patriot, Ohio, in 1856. He attended West Point where only one other student—Robert E. Lee—received higher scholastic honors. He later became famous as an Army engineer in the $3,500,000 Savannah project, winning an appointment as engineer of the Nicaragua Canal Commission. In 1899, while serving as military attaché at the Court of St. James in England, he was charged with fraud against the United States government, specifically in letting contracts for river and harbor improvements. A court-martial tried him. He was found guilty, dismissed from the Army, imposed with a fine, and sentenced to five years at Leavenworth.

As soon as his term ended, Carter began his fight in the United States courts. He claimed that a powerful politician had framed him because of his refusal to recommend Nicaragua instead of Panama as the site of the projected canal.

Four times the case went before the United States Supreme Court, after twenty-seven decisions on it had been reported to lower federal courts. Finally, in 1939, the House Military Affairs Committee voted Carter's vindication, and he was waiting for ratification from the Senate when World War II broke out. Out of a patriotic desire to prevent interference with the war effort, he suspended action on the case for the time being.

On July 19, 1944, Oberlin M. Carter died in Chicago, having lived eighty-eight years, forty-five of them spent in an effort to erase the stain on his honor. His case differs from that of Dreyfus: the latter was vindicated during his lifetime.

—Redding Davidstone

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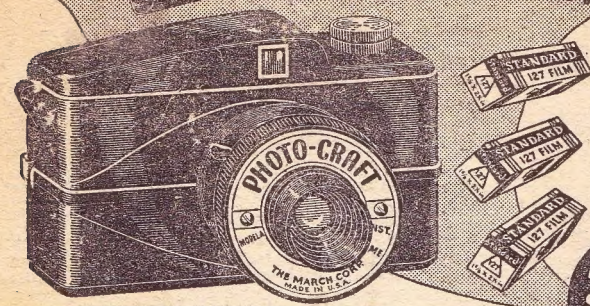

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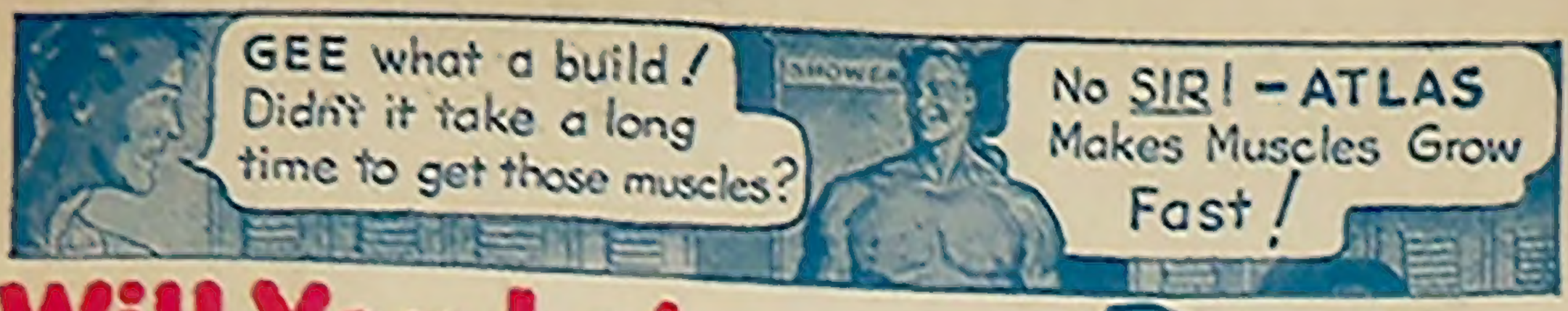

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